

*This document is one in a series created as part of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) Elections Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council and Sector Coordinating Council's Joint COVID Working Group. These documents provide guidance for state, local, tribal, and territorial election officials on how to administer and secure election infrastructure in light of the COVID-19 epidemic.*

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# Election Education and Outreach for Increased Absentee or Mail Voting

## Overview

As demand for absentee or mail ballots increases, states should consider how to communicate changes to voters. Effective communication can increase public access and participation, trust in our election process and facilitate election infrastructure security and integrity by providing voters with clear access to accurate information about the election process. Particularly important is communicating about the security and integrity of the absentee or mail voting process, both to increase public awareness of the security processes and to combat possible disinformation campaigns.

## General Questions

The following section contains questions regarding the impact of COVID-19.

### How is absentee or mail voting an option for voters to alleviate the challenges associated with COVID-19?

COVID-19 creates many challenges for conducting in-person voting, including providing adequate space for poll workers to safely work and voters to safely participate while following social distancing requirements. Also, jurisdictions are finding it difficult to hire and train the number of poll workers necessary to adequately operate in-person voting locations.

Increasing absentee and mail ballot voting will help alleviate the strain on in-person voting locations, which will still need to exist. Mail and absentee voting shifts voters away from in-person locations, thus requiring fewer poll workers on-site and fewer in-person locations. However, there will be a need for additional temporary election workers to help process absentee and mail ballots once they are returned. The safety of these workers will need to be protected as well.

## What do you need to communicate to voters, campaigns, and the media about how absentee or mail ballot voting will affect your ballot processing and counting times?

Expansion of absentee and mail ballot voting will likely increase the time necessary to process and tabulate ballots, perhaps significantly. It is critical to communicate this publicly and set realistic expectations for voters, campaigns, and the media well before Election Day. In larger jurisdictions, it could take as long as a week or more before outcomes are clear.

## Questions Election Officials Should Address When Developing Education and Outreach Strategies

This section poses questions stakeholders may have, which election officials should address as part of an effective communication strategy regarding enhanced absentee or mail ballot voting. The answers are especially critical to voters who have never voted by mail in any form.

### General Questions

- What is the difference between absentee voting and vote by mail?
- Why does increasing absentee voting or voting by mail make sense for my state given the health crisis?
- What is the fiscal impact of increasing absentee voting or voting by mail for my state?
- Does increasing absentee voting or voting by mail mean I cannot vote in person?

### Questions regarding how voters ensure they receive an absentee or vote by mail ballot

- How can I verify/update my voter registration information to ensure my address information is correct?
- Do I need to request an absentee ballot?
  - If yes, how do I request a ballot?
  - When does the request have to be received by my election officials?
  - What information am I required to submit with my request?
  - If an excuse is needed to receive an absentee ballot, what are the available excuses for an absentee ballot?
- Can I submit an absentee ballot application for another person (e.g., family member, co-worker, friend, etc.)?
  - If yes, are there any specific instructions or rules that I must follow?
- Can I use an address, other than my registration address, to receive my absentee ballot?

- When will ballots be mailed to voters?
- How long will it take to receive my ballot after it is mailed by the election office?
- What if my community is not well served by the postal service? (e.g., reservations, very rural, etc.)
- If I do not receive my ballot in the mail, can I get a replacement ballot?
  - Can I vote in person?

## Questions regarding voting/marking and returning a ballot

- How do I fill out the ballot?
- What can I use to fill out my ballot (pen, pencil, particular color, etc.)?
- If I make a mistake marking my ballot, can I correct the mistake on my existing ballot, or do I need to request a new ballot?
  - If I cannot correct the mistake on my existing ballot and it is spoiled, how may I request a new ballot?
  - What do I do with the spoiled ballot?
- What is the deadline to return my ballot?
  - Is my ballot due back by the close of polls on election night or should my ballot only be postmarked by Election Day?
  - How many days after Election Day do I have to return my postmarked ballot?
  - What is a postmark and how do I get one?
- Do I need to pay postage to return my voted ballot?
  - If yes, what postage is required to return my ballot?
- Is my signature required on my vote by mail ballot envelope or ballot package?
  - Circumstances have altered my signature. Can someone witness my signature so that my ballot will count?
  - IF A STATE REQUIRES A WITNESS OR NOTARY: How do I get something witnessed or notarized and still comply with social distancing?
- Can I track my ballot through the mail?
- Where can I return my ballot if I do not mail it?
- Can someone else return my voted ballot for me?
  - If yes, who is eligible to return my ballot?
- What is a ballot drop box?
- How often are ballots collected from ballot drop boxes?
- How are ballot drop boxes secured?
- How can I find locations to vote in person or drop off my ballot?
  - NOTE: While voters should always go to the official sources (i.e., local or state elections office website), the Voting Information Project (VIP) can display drop box and other ballot return locations, as a backup, so that this data is available to voters through a variety of different avenues.

## Questions regarding an independent and accessible voting experience

- What if I have a disability that makes it difficult or impossible to hand-mark a paper ballot?
- What if I have limited English proficiency or other challenges with reading a paper ballot?

## Questions regarding processing and tabulating absentee or vote by mail ballots

- How is the absentee or mail ballot process secured?
- How do you verify the ballot is coming from the voter authorized to vote it (e.g., signature verification, copy of voter identification or proof of residence, etc.)?
  - Do you verify signatures on all returned ballots?
  - What forms of ID are accepted?
- What happens if I forget to sign my ballot?
  - Will I be notified and allowed to correct it?
- What happens if my ballot is disqualified due to an alleged signature mismatch?
  - Will I be notified and allowed to correct it?
- Are all absentee/mail ballots counted?
- How and when is my ballot processed and counted?
  - How do you maintain a secret ballot if someone is opening the envelope with my name on it?
- How does an increase in absentee or mail ballots affect the counting of ballots and results reporting?
  - Will some election results be available before Election Day if people return their ballots early?
  - Will it take longer to report results?

## To Whom and How Are You Communicating?

This section poses considerations for election officials developing their communications strategies and plans.

## Which external groups/organizations should you be communicating with?

- Legislators/policy makers
- Political parties
- Campaigns

- Advocacy/interest groups, including disability rights groups and security groups
- Local community service organizations, including religious organizations
- Churches
- Senior citizen organizations
- Colleges and universities
- High schools
- Media

## Which internal groups/organizations should you be communicating with?

- Vendors (voting systems, printing, technology, website, etc.)
- Facilities staff
- Law enforcement
- Telecommunications and electricity providers
- Local Department of Transportation (DOT)
- Emergency management

## What methods can you use to communicate to voters/organizations?

- Office Call Centers
  - No poll workers are present to answer questions when a voter is voting at home, and some voters have never voted a hand-marked paper ballot before.
- Direct Mail
  - Educational mailing to voters can also help election officials with voter registration list maintenance because of the ability to process undeliverable mail received from the mailing.
- Television
  - Remember that media markets often cross jurisdictional lines. This could be an opportunity for cross-jurisdictional collaboration.
- Email
  - Email is a great way to inform all stakeholders of important election dates, provide links or attachments for voter registration or absentee applications, and other general election information such as counting facility tours, etc.
  - If voters do not remember opting-in to receiving emails, this could cause confusion or concerns about malicious actors.
- Opt-in Text Platforms
  - Text messaging can be used as a tool to provide important updates to voters, such as voter registration deadlines, and absentee ballot deadlines.

- If voters do not remember opting-in to a text platform or it is not clear who a text message is from, this could cause confusion or concerns about malicious actors.
- Social Media—Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.
  - Start now: you cannot wake up on November 1 and be a trusted source for information.
  - Most voters do not follow their election officials on social media, but members of the media do, so this can be a good way to get information to the broader public.
  - Local election jurisdictions that want to get their social media accounts verified (the official check mark) should contact their state election officials. States can work with the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) or the National Association of State Election Directors (NASED) to get these accounts verified.
- State/Local Websites
  - Think outside of elections. Other departments or agencies in your state or jurisdiction, such as the Department of Motor Vehicle, can provide accurate election information and direct voters to your website.
- Inserts in Utility and/or Tax Bills
  - Think of including infographics with important election dates and, if applicable, absentee ballot applications.
- Required Election Legal Notices
- Mail Ballot Envelopes and Secrecy Sleeves
  - Please make sure to review all envelope designs with your USPS Mail Piece Design Analyst.
- Newspaper
  - Think creatively about how you can use newspapers. For example, in Ohio, newspapers have printed absentee ballot request forms.
- Radio
  - Like television, remember that radio stations can cross jurisdictional boundaries.
- Billboards—traditional and electronic (e.g., Department of Transportation road signs)
  - Billboards are a great way to publicize important dates, such as “Last Day to Apply for a Ballot” or “Exit Here for Vote Center/Ballot Drop Box.”
- Robocalls
  - Many local jurisdictions are already equipped to do robocalls for public service campaigns.
  - The Communications Sector Coordinating Council [released guidance](#) to ensure that legitimate COVID-19 related public service announcements are not inadvertently blocked by mobile carriers.

## What communication methods can you use to increase transparency during and after this transition?

Using a free social media or video service, you can:

- Livestream ballot processing
- Offer a live stream or recorded virtual tour of your ballot processing facilities
- Hold an Election Facility Open House
- Give virtual press tours and briefings before, during, and after the election (can be on the record, on background, or off the record)

Online publications and infographics can also be useful.

- Example: [\(Denver\) Ballot Life Cycle](#)

## How important are ballot design and voter instructions in conducting and communicating about a vote by mail election?

- Ballot design (and mail ballot envelope design) is vitally important to help reduce voter confusion when voting. A poorly designed ballot (or mail ballot envelope) can lead to lost votes on specific contests or voters choosing not to participate at all.
- In addition to the design of the ballot, clearly written instructions are critical to ensuring that voters can successfully cast their ballots from home.
- The [Center for Civic Design Field Guides](#) are a resource for election officials when designing election materials.

## Securing Your Communications Platforms

Using technology always comes with cybersecurity concerns. This section contains security considerations and recommendations for election officials to secure their domain and/or social media accounts.

- Use multifactor authentication on all official and personal social media and email accounts.
- Update and patch your software.
- Develop cyber incident reporting and communication protocols for your incident response team and the election community via EI-ISAC and CISA.
- Sign up for CISA services, such as vulnerability (a.k.a. Cyber Hygiene) scans, remote penetration testing (RPT), phishing campaign assessment, etc. All CISA services can be located in the [CISA Election Infrastructure Security Resource Guide](#). To request CISA services, contact [CISACustomerService@cisa.dhs.gov](mailto:CISACustomerService@cisa.dhs.gov).
- Become an EI-ISAC Member to gain awareness on the threats to the election infrastructure by visiting <https://www.cisecurity.org/ei-isac/>.

- ❑ Use a .gov name to make domain squatting more difficult; reserve your name early and contact name reputation services to have them categorize your site appropriately as official.
- ❑ Monitor that only allowed traffic is permitted to access your online channels. If you are using application programming interfaces (APIs) for data exchanges, monitor, manage, and secure access to the APIs.
- ❑ Consider using a web application firewall.