



Pennsylvania  
Department of State

# Guidance Concerning Civilian Absentee and Mail-in Ballot Procedures

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## Mail-in and Civilian<sup>1</sup> Absentee Balloting – General Provisions

Qualified voters may apply at any time before 5:00 p.m. on the Tuesday before any primary or election day for a mail-in or absentee ballot, and county boards of elections must begin processing applications at least fifty (50) days before the primary or election day. County boards of elections may process applications earlier than fifty (50) days before the primary or election day, if the county board of elections determines that it is appropriate for its operational needs to do so.

This guidance addresses the required procedures and provides best practices for counties in offering vote-by-mail (VBM) services to their voters, including on-demand mail voting at a county election office (CEO).

## Who May Request an Absentee or Mail-in Ballot?

All qualified voters in Pennsylvania are eligible to vote by mail-in ballot, and no excuse or reason is required. For example, even if a voter will be present in their municipality on Election Day but would simply prefer to vote from home, their county election office, or some other location, they may request a mail-in ballot. They may request that the ballot be sent to an address other than their address of registration.

Absentee ballots may be voted by domestic voters who will be absent from their municipality on Election Day due to work or vacation, voters who are celebrating a religious holiday, and voters such as college students who also may be away from the municipality on Election Day, if they don't choose to vote where they go to school.

Absentee ballots are also for those voters who are unable to attend their polling place due to illness or physical disability. Many of the same procedures apply to both mail-in and absentee ballots, which are collectively referred to as "mail ballots." Voters who are eligible to cast absentee ballots may instead opt to vote by mail-in ballot.

A voter may qualify for and vote only one ballot. Counties that allow voters to replace their ballots — for example, if a mistake is made or the ballot is lost in the mail — must

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<sup>1</sup> This guidance discusses procedures for mail-in voting and absentee voting by domestic civilians. Overseas voters and military voters are subject to separate procedures, and more information is available on the Department's website at <https://www.vote.pa.gov/Voting-in-PA/pages/military-and-overseas-voters.aspx>.



ensure that the first ballot is cancelled in the Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors (SURE).

## Annual Mail Ballot and Permanent Absentee Voter Lists

Any qualified voter can request to be placed on what is known as the **annual mail ballot list** at any time. Voters on this list will receive an application to vote by mail each year. Though voters remain on this list indefinitely, they must renew their mail-in ballot application each year to receive a mail-in ballot for every election that year and any special elections held through the third Monday in February of the following year.

Voters with a permanent illness or disability are eligible for the **permanent absentee voter list**; this option is not available to voters expecting to be absent from their municipality on Election Day. Absentee voters who request to be placed on the permanent absentee voter list must provide certification from their attending physician that they are permanently disabled and physically unable to attend the polls or operate a voting machine. Permanent absentee voters must submit a written statement asserting continuing disability every four years in order to maintain their eligibility to vote under the permanent absentee program.

Please refer to the [Permanent Voter Lists Guidance](#) for more details on administering and placing voters on the annual mail ballot and permanent absentee voter lists.

## Requesting an Absentee or Mail-in Ballot

Voters have their choice of three (3) ways to apply for mail-in or absentee ballots:

1. By U.S. mail
2. In person – at a CEO or satellite CEO
3. Online - through the DOS website or an approved API partner

All voters applying for an absentee or mail-in ballot must provide proof of identification.



## Mail Requests

### Notice and Public Observation

A voter may submit a paper application via U.S. mail to their county board of elections for an absentee or mail-in ballot. A voter may also submit the combined Voter Registration Application and Mail-in Ballot Request form to apply for or update their voter registration and to request a mail-in ballot at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

When the mail-in or absentee ballot application period is simultaneously open for two elections, as may occur when a special election takes place close-in-time to a primary or general election, the county should process a single mail ballot application as a request for a mail ballot for all eligible elections within that period.

Voters may have their ballot delivered to their address of registration or to another address they designate on their application. Voters should be aware that their counties may not allow mail ballots to be designated as forwardable, and voters should identify on the ballot application the actual address where they intend to retrieve the ballot (as opposed to relying on a mail forwarding service).

### In-person (Over-the-Counter) Requests, Including Single-transaction Registration and Mail Ballot Casting (On-demand VBM)

The Pennsylvania Election Code permits voters to request and submit an absentee or mail-in ballot at the same time in advance of Election Day if they choose to do so. After ballots are finalized by a county, voters may apply in person at their CEO, including any satellite office, during established business hours to receive and return their completed mail-in or absentee ballot while the voter is in the office. The voter must be allowed to vote the ballot in private. Voters seeking to register or update their registration while also requesting a mail-in ballot may do so while receiving prompt service during a single trip to the CEO.

When a voter appears in person and submits both a voter registration application and a mail-in ballot application or submits the combined form with options to jointly update a registration record and apply for a mail-in ballot, the CEO staff must process the voter registration application first.

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<sup>2</sup> County election office staff should refer to the relevant user guides for specific instructions on how to process applications in the Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors (SURE).



The CEO staff must **immediately** evaluate the voter registration application and determine whether to accept, deny, or forward the application while the applicant waits, and must process the voter registration application if accepted.<sup>3</sup>

The CEO staff must then **immediately** evaluate the qualifications of an individual to receive a mail-in or absentee ballot; CEO staff may not deny the eligible voter's request to have the ballot presented to the voter while the voter is in the CEO unless there is a bona fide objection to the absentee or mail-in ballot application.<sup>4</sup> As part of this process, CEO staff must be sure to follow the identification verification procedures discussed in Section 2.5 of this guidance.

Once the voter is determined to be qualified and the application for an absentee or mail-in ballot is approved, the county board of elections **must promptly present** the voter with the voter's mail-in or absentee ballot.

Counties may want to consider a plan to make the evaluation of the combined form, or separate applications, easier for the CEO staff. Counties with access to computers or tablets may want to consider allowing an applicant who appears in person at the CEO to submit their applications electronically, speeding up the processing and verification.

For in-person requests at the central office or any designated satellite office, counties must be sure to properly record in SURE that the ballot delivery method is CNTR, to represent over-the-counter/on-demand requests.

Voters who receive a mail-in or absentee ballot in person at the CEO must be provided an opportunity to privately and secretly mark their ballot.

**Note:** *The marking of the ballot in secret does not have to take place in the CEO. It can be provided in a nearby location. Voters are also permitted to take their balloting materials to their home or car for marking and to return to the CEO to remit their ballot.*

For voters who return their completed mail ballot package in person, CEO staff are encouraged to check the return envelopes for obvious errors that would prevent the ballot from being included in the final canvass.

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<sup>3</sup> 25 P.S. § 3071(e)(2).

<sup>4</sup> 25 P.S. § 3146.5(b)(2).



### Satellite County Election Office

County election boards may provide for election services — including voter registration, mail-in and absentee ballot application processing, and marking of absentee and mail ballots — at more than one location within county borders.

Counties may also establish additional, extended business hours for CEOs; hours do not have to be limited to weekdays or to typical business hours. Counties are encouraged to offer business hours outside of these time frames, including weeknights or weekend hours, to enable maximum flexibility and convenience for voters.

When a county decides to provide voters with additional access to mail-in and absentee balloting by establishing satellite CEOs, the county must account for all of the following:

- Each satellite CEO must be in municipal- or county-owned or leased locations selected by the county board of elections to provide election services.
- Each satellite CEO must be staffed by personnel appointed by the county board of elections.
- Each satellite CEO must have a secure county network connection that can connect to SURE and staff trained and approved to access SURE.
  - **Note:** The Department will work with counties to establish secure connections, including through secure wireless solutions; the county network extension must be approved by the Department.
- Each satellite CEO must have either copies of all ballot styles available to be voted in the county, or an on-demand ballot printer capable of printing all ballot styles available to be voted in the county.
- Each satellite CEO must have a secure ballot collection receptacle to store voted mail-in and absentee ballots submitted at the location. County boards of election are required to keep voted ballots in a sealed or locked container until the time of pre-canvassing.

Please see the Department of State's [Absentee and Mail-In Ballot In-Person Return Guidance](#) for more information and guidance on choosing a location for a satellite CEO.



## Online Requests

A voter may submit an absentee or mail-in ballot application online via the Department's portal at [PA Voter Services](#) or may submit a mail-in ballot application through an approved API posting entity.

Online applications must be processed according to the same statutory requirements as applications submitted by U.S. mail or in person, including the proof of identification requirements defined in the Election Code.

## Identity Verification of Absentee and Mail-in Ballot Applicants

Voters applying to vote by absentee or mail-in ballot must provide proof of identification (as defined in the Election Code) to be verified by county boards of elections before their ballot can be counted. Proof of identification for absentee and mail-in voting can be satisfied by a valid driver's license number, the last four digits of the voter's Social Security number, or other valid photo identification listed in Section 102 of the Election Code, 25 P.S. § 2602(z.5)(3).<sup>5</sup>

If the CEO is not able to verify the identification of the applicant, the ballot must not be canvassed until the applicant provides sufficient, verifiable identification.<sup>6</sup> The applicant has until six (6) calendar days following an election to provide qualifying identification.

## Delivery of Mail-in and Absentee Balloting Materials

All components being used for the election, including all ballot styles, precinct scanners, central count scanners, accessible devices, and any backup equipment being used, must be part of the L&A testing.

Counties must begin delivering mail-in and absentee balloting materials as soon as ballots are certified and available. Counties may await the outcome of pending litigation that affects the contents of the ballots but, in any event, the county must begin delivering mail-in and absentee balloting materials no later than the second (2<sup>nd</sup>) Tuesday prior to Election Day.

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<sup>5</sup> CEO staff should refer to the relevant user guides for specific instructions on reviewing and documenting proper voter identification in SURE.

<sup>6</sup> The forms of identification acceptable for verifying the voter's information may be found in the Department's guidance on [Voter Identification Requirements for Voting](#).



Once a county begins delivering their balloting materials, as additional applications are received and approved, the county must deliver or mail balloting materials to such additional voters within forty-eight (48) hours of receipt of approved applications.

The absentee and mail-in balloting materials must include the following:

1. The voter's proper ballot style, with each qualifying race or ballot issue, based on the voter's registration address.
2. A yellow, inner (or "secrecy") envelope labelled "Official Election Ballot."
3. A pre-addressed outer ballot-return envelope that contains a declaration for the voter to sign and date.
4. An instructional insert which describes how to mark and return the ballot.

The voted ballot must be returned within the yellow inner envelope, which must be placed in the pre-addressed outer envelope.

Counties should refer to Secretary's Directive Concerning the Form of Absentee and Mail-in Ballot Materials for additional prescriptions of these materials.

## Return of Ballots by Voters

Voters have the option of returning their voted absentee or mail-in ballot in one of several ways:

1. By mail.
2. In person at either
  - a CEO or satellite CEO, or
  - a county dropbox/ballot return site (if offered).

In all circumstances, the absentee or mail-in ballot must be received by the county board of elections by 8:00 p.m. on Election Day.

## Returning Ballots by Mail

Voters have the option of returning their mail-in or absentee ballot via the U.S. Postal Service and should review their instructions regarding any needed postage. Counties may pre-pay for postage.





## Returning Ballots to Designated Return Locations and Dropboxes

In addition to the main CEO and satellite CEOs, counties may provide for other secure ballot-collection locations that the county deems appropriate to accommodate in-person return of voted mail-in and absentee ballots. Please refer to the Department's ***Absentee and Mail-In Ballot In-Person Return Guidance***<sup>7</sup> for more information and guidance regarding ballot-collection locations and procedures.

County boards of election are required to keep voted absentee and mail-in ballots in a sealed or locked container(s) until the time of pre-canvassing.

## Receiving Voted Absentee and Mail-In Ballots at County Election Offices

Regardless of the delivery method, as county election offices receive voted absentee and mail-in ballots the following general procedures should be followed:

1. The date and time of receipt should be stamped on the ballot return envelope.
2. The barcode on the ballot return envelope should be scanned into the SURE system, and the proper status code should be assigned to the ballot. This status code is used in a few different ways:
  - a. To provide data to the online ballot tracking portal, enabling voters to check their ballot status at any time.
  - b. To generate an email advising the voter of their ballot status, if the voter provided an email address at the time of application.
  - c. To advise district election officials (poll workers) that the voter has already returned a ballot and may only complete a provisional ballot. (Provisional ballots are only counted if the voter meets certain criteria and has not cast a ballot for that election by any other means).
  - d. To assist county election staff in managing inventory and performing reconciliation.
3. The ballot must be stored securely until the county begins the pre-canvass or canvass.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/dos/resources/voting-and-elections/directives-and-guidance/2023-Ballot-Return-Guidance-2.0.pdf>



The SURE system will only allow one ballot to be marked as “recorded” per voter.

### Voter Must Return Own Ballot

Under Pennsylvania law, every voter must return their own ballot, unless the voter qualifies for assistance from a designated agent. Any ballot returned by someone other than the voter (including the spouse of a voter), or an agent chosen by a disabled voter, must be set aside.

A voter with a disability who needs help returning their voted ballot may receive assistance from a designated agent. Designated agent forms may be found at [vote.pa.gov](https://vote.pa.gov), in English,<sup>8</sup> Spanish,<sup>9</sup> and Traditional Chinese.<sup>10</sup>

### Surrender Process for Voters Who Request Mail-in or Absentee Ballots

The voter may take their absentee or mail-in balloting materials to their polling place on Election Day, surrender those materials to a poll worker, and vote a regular ballot in person. The district poll books in each polling place will indicate which voters have requested an absentee or mail-in ballot and are eligible to surrender their ballot. If the voter is listed in the poll book as requesting a mail-in or absentee ballot but cannot surrender their balloting materials, or if the voter is listed in the poll book as having returned a mail-in or absentee ballot, then the voter may only cast a provisional ballot.

Further information on provisional voting, and a declaration to be signed by the voter when surrendering their absentee or mail-in balloting materials, can be found in the Department's [Pennsylvania Provisional Voting Guidance](#).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/vote/resources/documents-and-forms/Authorize-Designated-Agent-for-Mail-in-or-Absentee-Ballot.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/vote/resources/documents-and-forms/Authorize-Designated-Agent-for-Mail-in-or-Absentee-Ballot-SPANISH.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/vote/resources/documents-and-forms/Authorize-Designated-Agent-for-Mail-in-or-Absentee-Ballot-Chinese.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/dos/resources/voting-and-elections/directives-and-guidance/2024-ProvisionalBallots-Guidance-2.1.pdf>.



## Absentee and Mail-in Voting Processes for County Election Officials

### Poll Book Processes

The poll books will be divided into two sections.

The main section will include a) voters who have not requested a mail-in or absentee ballot for this election and b) voters who requested an absentee or mail-in ballot but who did not return their ballot by the date the poll books were printed. There will be a special notation in the poll book indicating that voters who did not return their mail ballot by the date the poll books were printed must either surrender their ballot as described in Section 4.3 above or vote provisionally if they appear at the polling place on Election Day.

The secondary section of the poll book will contain a list of voters who have both requested and returned their absentee or mail-in ballot by the time the poll book was printed.

Voters who requested but have not returned their absentee or mail-in ballot may vote a regular ballot in person at their polling place on Election Day ONLY if they surrender their mail ballot and the declaration envelope that accompanies it, as explained in the Department's [Pennsylvania Provisional Voting Guidance](#). The poll worker shall take the surrendered ballot and declaration envelope and mark them as "VOID." There is a location in the poll book where the poll worker must indicate that the items were surrendered. The voided ballot, declaration envelope, and signed surrender declaration should be placed in a secure envelope or container and returned to the CEO with other polling place materials at the end of the voting day. The surrendered ballot materials must be preserved.

As noted above, for voters whose voted absentee or mail-in ballot has been received, the poll book record will indicate that their mail ballot was returned. This will aid poll workers when checking in voters to easily determine that these voters are not eligible to vote on the voting equipment, but they may vote provisionally if they believe they are eligible to vote.

The notations in the poll books described above also apply to voters with a permanent flag on their voter record. In either case, the poll worker will be able to determine the appropriate course of action when reviewing the poll book on Election Day.



## Pre-canvassing and Canvassing Absentee and Mail-in Ballots

Under the Election Code, counties must begin pre-canvassing returned absentee and mail-in ballots no earlier than 7:00 a.m. on Election Day and must begin canvassing returned absentee and mail-in ballots no earlier than the close of polls and no later than the third (3rd) day following Election Day.

### Pre-Canvass

- The pre-canvass of mail-in and absentee ballots may begin no earlier than 7:00 AM on Election Day. County boards of election must provide notification of the time and location of the pre-canvass meeting at least 48 hours prior to the meeting by posting notice on their website.
- Pursuant to Act 88 of 2022, counties that have received funding for elections under the Election Integrity Grant Program must begin the pre-canvass meeting at 7:00 AM on Election Day and continue the pre-canvass without interruption until each mail-in ballot and absentee ballot received by 7:00 AM on Election Day is pre-canvassed. Please refer to the [Act 88 Guidance and FAQ document](#) for more information about these requirements.
- The county board of elections must provide a list of the names of the voters whose absentee or mail-in ballots are to be pre-canvassed.
- One authorized representative for each candidate and one authorized representative for each political party must be permitted to remain in the room where the pre-canvass meeting occurs. Refer to the Department's [Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives](#) for information on authorized representatives at the pre-canvass and canvass.
- Persons observing, attending, or participating in the pre-canvass meeting MAY NOT disclose the result of any portion of the pre-canvass prior to the close of polls on Election Day.

No challenges by authorized representatives or any third party are permitted during pre-canvass of the mail-in and absentee ballots.



The Department strongly urges all counties, not just those counties who participate in the Election Integrity Grant Program, to begin pre-canvassing at the earliest time allowed – 7:00 AM on Election Day.

### Canvass

- The canvass of mail-in and absentee ballots may begin no earlier than the close of polls and no later than the third (3<sup>rd</sup>) day following the election. County boards of election must provide notification of the time and location of the canvass meeting at least 48 hours prior to the meeting by posting notice on their website.
- Pursuant to Act 88 of 2022, counties that have received funding under the Election Integrity Grant Program **must** begin canvassing mail-in and absentee ballots at 8:00 PM on Election Day and must continue without interruption until each mail-in ballot and absentee ballot has been canvassed. Please refer to the Act 88 Guidance and FAQ document for more information about these requirements.
  - Those counties receiving funding pursuant to Act 88 of 2022 under the Election Integrity Grant Program are required to announce and post on their publicly accessible internet website, no later than 12:01 AM on the day following the election, the unofficial number of absentee and mail-in ballots received for the election.
- The county board of elections must provide a list of the names of the voters whose absentee or mail-in ballots are to be canvassed.
- The canvass must continue through the eighth (8<sup>th</sup>) day following the election to include valid military and overseas ballots received by 5:00 PM on the seventh (7<sup>th</sup>) day following the election.
- One authorized representative for each candidate and one authorized representative for each political party must be permitted to remain in the room where the canvass meeting occurs. Refer to the Department's [Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives](#) for information on authorized representatives at the pre-canvass and canvass.



The Department strongly urges all counties, not just those counties who participate in the Election Integrity Grant Program, to begin canvassing at the earliest time allowed – 8:00 PM on Election Day.

### Pre-canvass and Canvass Procedures

At the pre-canvass or canvass, the county board of elections should:

- Segregate the unopened ballots of voters whose applications were challenged by the challenge deadline (5:00 PM on the Friday before the election).
  - These ballots must be placed in a secure, sealed container until the board of elections holds a formal hearing on the challenged ballots.
  - Ballot applications can only be challenged on the basis that the applicant is not qualified to vote.
- Set aside the ballot of any voter who was deceased before Election Day.

Nothing in the Election Code prohibits the use of tape to seal a ballot-return envelope, and any such ballots should not be declared void solely for this reason so long as the envelope is not otherwise torn or noticeably altered.

Set aside any ballots without a signed declaration envelope.

- Segregate any ballots enclosed in a declaration envelope that is undated or deemed to have an incorrect date. A ballot should be considered “incorrectly dated” only if the date written on the envelope cannot reasonably be interpreted to be “the day upon which [the voter] completed the declaration.”<sup>12</sup> If the voter appears to have used the European dating convention (D/M/Y), or placed slashes or other non-numerical symbols in the date boxes, such envelopes should not be considered to be “incorrectly dated.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Ball v. Chapman*, 289 A.3d 1, 23 (Pa. 2023).

<sup>13</sup> The issue of whether ballots that are enclosed within a declaration envelope that is undated or deemed to have an incorrect date, should be canvassed is the subject of litigation currently before the Supreme Court. See *BPEP v. Schmidt*, 283 M.D. 2024, 2024 WL 4002321 (Pa. Cmwlth. Aug. 30, 2024), *appeal pending*, 68 MAP 2024 (Pa.). In that case, Commonwealth Court held, “The refusal to count undated or incorrectly dated but timely mail ballots submitted by otherwise eligible voters because of meaningless and inconsequential paperwork errors violates the fundamental right to vote recognized in the free and



- Set aside any ballots without the secrecy envelope and any ballots in a secrecy envelope that include text, mark, or symbol which reveals the identity of the voter, the voter's political affiliation (party), or the voter's candidate preference.
  - Sometimes voters use tape to ensure that the envelope flaps are securely sealed. The Election Code does not prohibit the use of tape or other fasteners to seal the Official Ballot Envelope (inner or secrecy envelope), and any such ballot should not be declared void solely for this reason, so long as the envelope is not otherwise marked or altered so as to be capable of identification.
- All ballot-return envelopes containing executed declarations must be retained for a period of two years in accordance with the Election Code.
- The status of any absentee or mail-in ballots that are set aside uncounted should be updated in SURE using the appropriate drop-down selection for reconciliation and reporting purposes.

The Election Code does not permit county election officials to reject applications or voted ballots based solely on signature analysis.

No challenges may be made to mail-in or absentee ballot applications after 5:00 PM on the Friday before the election.

No challenges may be made to mail-in or absentee ballots at any time based on signature analysis. And after the 5:00 PM deadline on the Friday before the election, no challenge may be made to mail ballots.

Additionally, the county board of elections should not open or count any absentee or mail-in ballots pending ID verification, as follows:

- If proof of identification for an absentee or mail-in voter was not received or could not be verified, the ballot should not be counted unless the elector provides proof of identification that can be verified by the county board by the sixth (6<sup>th</sup>) calendar day following Election Day.

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equal elections clause [of the Pennsylvania Constitution]." 2024 WL 4002321, at \*1. That decision has been appealed to the Supreme Court. The Department will provide updated guidance as soon as it is able.



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Version	Date	Description
1.0	9.28.2020	Initial document release
2.0	9.26.2022	Updates to conform to legislative changes and litigation
3.0	4.03.2023	Updates to conform to administrative changes and litigation
3.1	09.10.2024	Updates to conform to county questions and to address best practices