

# Absentee Ballot Best Practices



2018 Election Administrator Certification Training  
Updated January 2018

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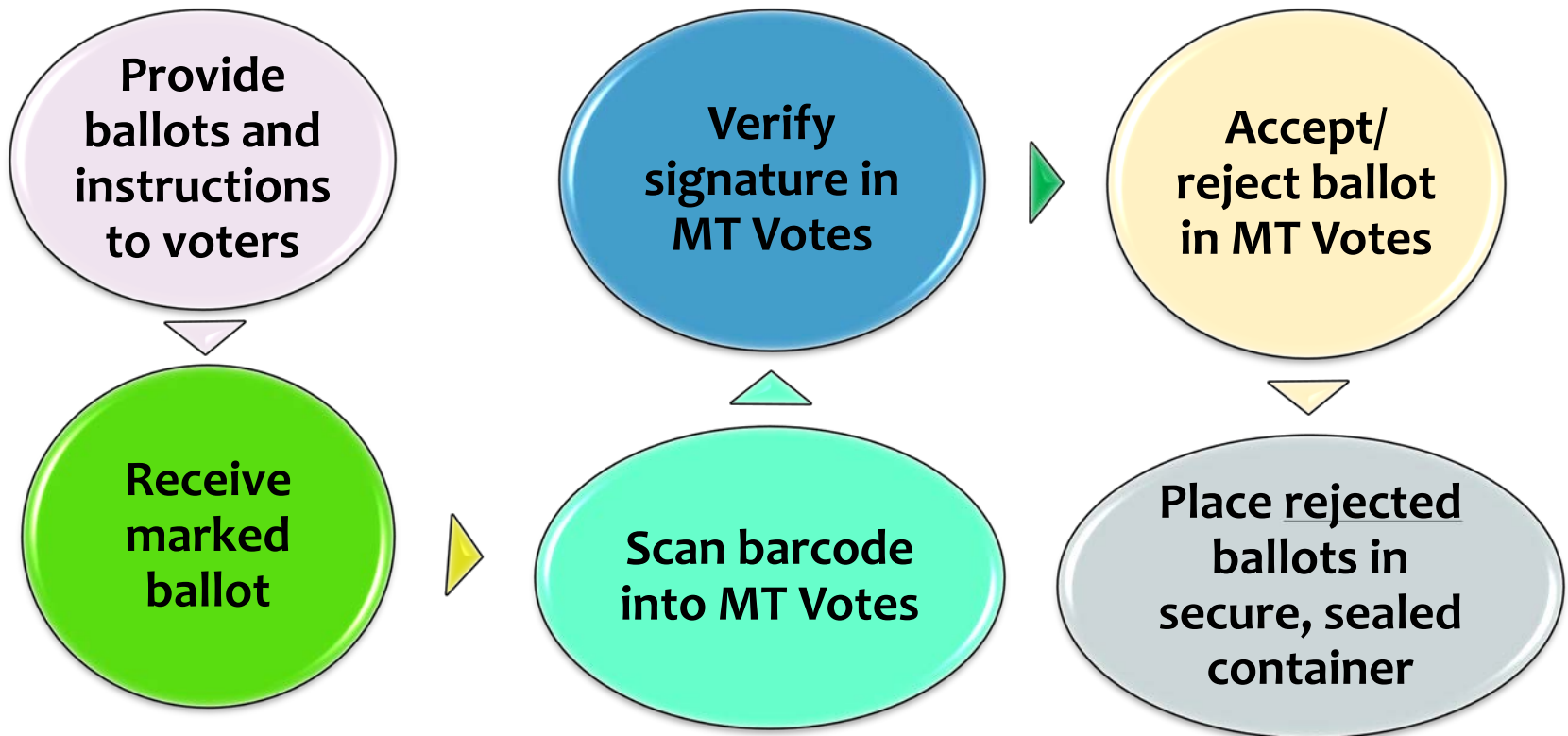
# Regarding Statutory Requirements

- \* This presentation is not intended to repeat statutory requirements, since all such requirements are available in Title 13.
- \* The purpose of this training is to suggest and discuss specific absentee best practices.



# Absentee Flow Chart 1 (sending, receiving, rejecting\*)

\*See next flow chart for processing accepted ballots



# Providing Ballots to Electors

- \* Electors who come into your office to apply for and request absentee ballots, **after ballots are printed**, should be given ballots, even if they come in before ballots are mailed.
- \* Absentee ballots must be sent to absent military and overseas electors as soon as ballots are printed and no later than 46 days before the election.
  - This is verified and strictly enforced by US DOJ.

# Providing Ballots to Electors

- \* Other electors should be **mailed** ballots on the 25<sup>th</sup> day before election day (never earlier than the 25<sup>th</sup> day).
  - If absentee ballots are already sent when electors change/update registration, the county that sent the original ballot has to void the ballot before the registration can be processed and a new ballot issued.

# Providing Ballots to Electors

## \* USPS

- Recommendations:
  - Meet with Post Office personnel and/or Mail Service Company **at least one month prior to mailing.**
  - Make sure envelopes meet **USPS requirements.**



# Providing Ballots to Electors

## \* USPS

- Recommendations:
  - Inform USPS of the **number** of ballots being mailed.
  - Remind them how critical it is to receive back **undeliverable ballots as soon as possible**.
  - Discuss specific **cost-savings** measures.



# Ballot Instructions

- \* In order to maintain **uniformity**, counties are advised to use the **prescribed absentee instructions**:
  - Minor variations may be necessary, especially based on county-specific considerations.
  - For major variations, please consult SOS.
- \* Be sure to **read the absentee instructions** to ensure that they are applicable, clear and concise.
- \* Ensure that instructions specify the **accurate amount of postage** needed to return the marked ballot.



# Receiving Ballots from Electors

- \* Some counties label every mail tray with an **inventory slip**:
  - For example: label the first as **Tray 1 of 8**, include the **# of ballots** enclosed, sort by **groups of 25**.
  - Mail & In-person batches are kept separate.
    - When entering batches into MT Votes you need to select mail, in-person, etc.; keeping the mailed-in and in-person batches **separate** ensures that you do not have to change the source in MT Votes for each ballot.

# Receiving Ballots from Electors


- \* Prepare envelopes so **signatures are visible** (keeping them in groups of 25).
- \* **Scan bar code** – each batch should equal 25.
- \* Also, put undeliverable ballots in batches of 25. Filing the undeliverable ballots by **batch #** eliminates the need to alphabetize undeliverables for retrievables.

# Daily Absentee Ballot Reconciliation

- \* In order to conduct daily absentee ballot reconciliation, **compare accepted envelopes with the BP34 report** from MT Votes and fill out **Part 1** of the **Ballot Reconciliation Report**.
- \* Make a **copy of the Ballot Reconciliation Report** and seal the original Ballot Reconciliation Report with the secrecy envelopes.

# Daily Absentee Ballot Reconciliation



 **Ballot Reconciliation Report (for Poll Book)**

Form is included in the back of each poll book and is used to reconcile ballots on Election Day.

COUNTY \_\_\_\_\_ PRECINCT \_\_\_\_\_

**PART 1**

1. Last ballot number issued \_\_\_\_\_
2. Subtract Void and Spoiled Ballots \_\_\_\_\_
3. **Subtotal** \_\_\_\_\_
4. Subtract number of ballots reserved for Absentee voting – see [Ballot Certification Report](#) (use the “Total number of ballots retained for Absentee voting” number from that form) \_\_\_\_\_
5. **Total number of paper ballots issued** \_\_\_\_\_

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**PART 2**

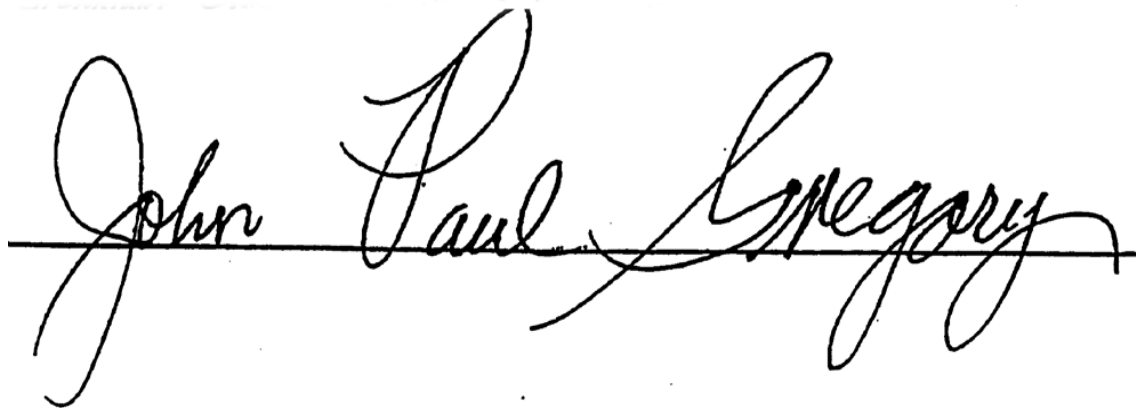
# Signature Verification

- \* Next step is to **verify signatures**.
- \* In MT Votes, select **Verify on batch management** or use the **F12 key** on the home screen for the voter.
- \* Also in **MT Votes**, set up **trained individuals** who are responsible to verify signatures.
- \* Set up procedures for the ballots they reject.
  - Designate **yourself or another election official** to be responsible for reviewing all **rejected** signatures.

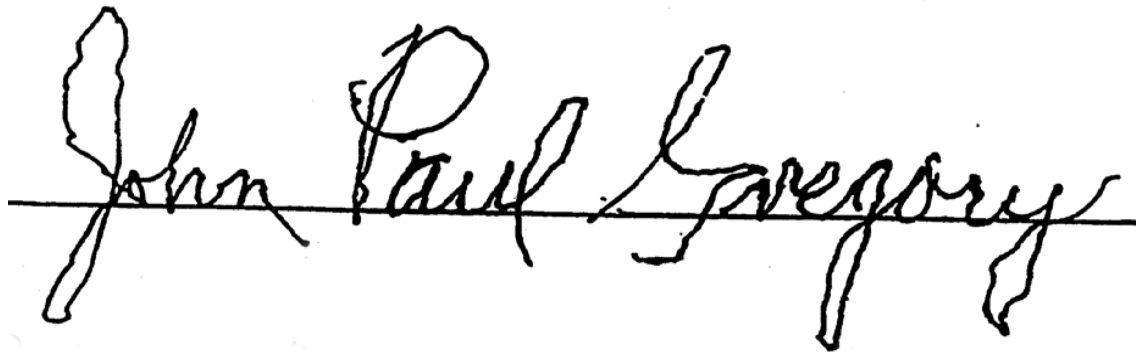
# Signature Verification

- \* Review all signatures using the following criteria:
  - **capital** letters match;
  - letters **tail off** alike;
  - **letter spacing** is the same;
  - space between **signature and the line** is the same;
  - **beginning** and **ending** of signature;
  - the “**t**” crossing, “**i**” and “**j**” dotting, and letter strokes that drop **below the line**;
  - **pen pressure** is the same.

# Signature Verification Examples



John Paul Gregory

A clear, fluid handwritten signature of "John Paul Gregory" written on a horizontal line. The letters are well-defined and connected in a cursive style.

John Paul Gregory

A second handwritten signature of "John Paul Gregory" written on a horizontal line. This signature is slightly less fluid than the one above, with some letters appearing more tentative or less connected.

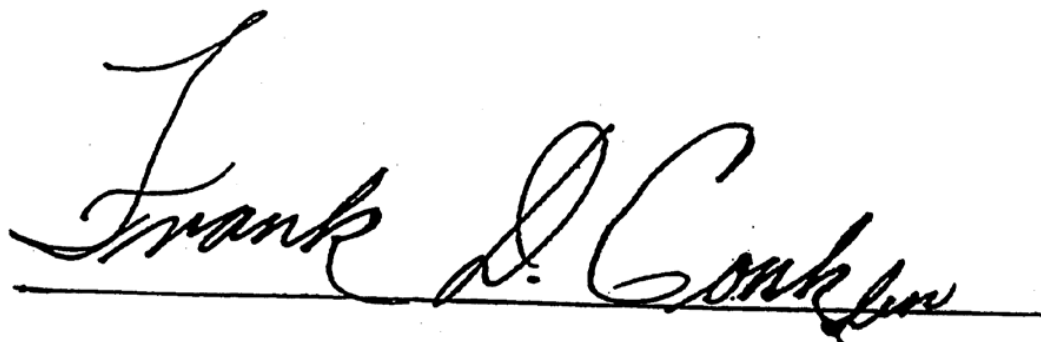
# Signature Verification Examples

- \* Example Above: Signature change may have taken place because of **age** or other factors.
- \* If the change is extreme, recommend that the signer provide an updated voter registration form with the **signer's most current signature.**



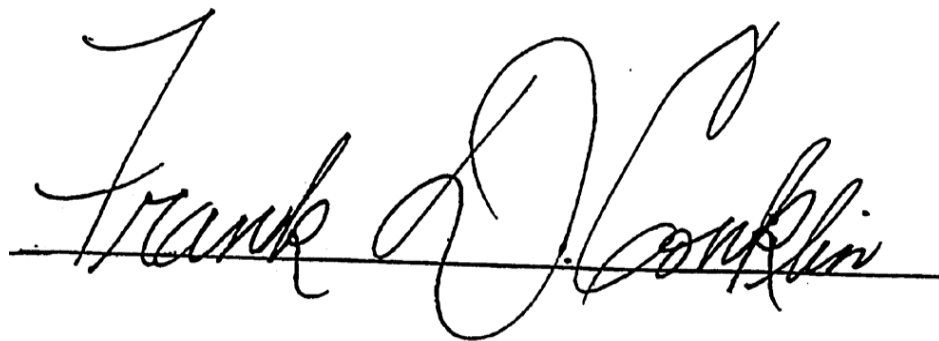
# Signature Verification Examples

## Original Signature



Frank D. Conklin

## Comparison Signature



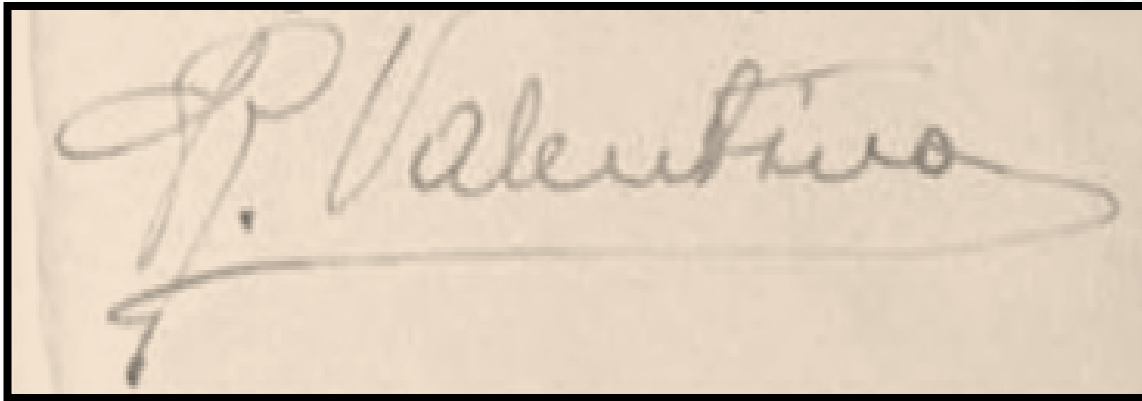
Frank D. Conklin

# Signature Verification Examples

- \* Example Above: The comparison signature may not be a match. **Pen pressure** is different and **several letters** are different.
- \* You may wish to check registrations of **other voters in the household** with the second signature, to see if someone in the household signed instead.

# Signature Verification Examples

## Original Signature



## Comparison Signature



# Signature Verification Examples

- \* Example Above: This is a real-life example. The comparison signature is fake.
  - In the real signature, the **"V" in Valentino** is **rounded** and never pointed.
  - The **"R"** in Rudolph is much different as well.
  - The **"pen pressure"** appears to be different in the fake as well.

# Signature Verification

- \* Before **rejecting** a signature, view other signatures on file in MT Votes.
  - A best practice may be for election officials to check **all of the available signatures in MT Votes**, especially if the voter has a very old voter registration application on file.


# Ballot Rejection Determinations

- \* Use **previous precinct registers** to verify signatures (as a backup if you aren't quite sure on a signature).
  - Be sure to use the **VR application** or **Absentee Application** as the **final authority**.
- \* Once all signature verification attempts have been exhausted and you still believe the signature is a mismatch, the election administrator shall give notice to the elector by the **most expedient method** available and send “**Verification of Signature**” form to elector to resolve rejected ballot.

# Ballot Rejection Determinations

- \* The election administrator shall inform the elector that, prior to 8 p.m. on election day, the elector may:
  - By **mail, facsimile, electronic means, or in person**, resolve the issue that resulted in the ballot being handled as a provisional ballot, confirm the validity of the ballot, or verify the elector's or agent's signature or provide a signature, after proof of identification, **by affirming that the signature is in fact the elector's, by completing a new registration form containing the elector's current signature**, or by providing a new agent designation form; or
  - If necessary, request and receive a replacement ballot pursuant to [13-13-204](#).

# Absentee or Mail Ballot Signature Verification or Submission of Missing Signature

 Absentee or Mail Ballot Signature Verification or Submission of Missing Signature 13-13-245, MCA

**MUST BE COMPLETED AND RETURNED TO THE COUNTY ELECTION OFFICE**

Note to Absentee or Mail Ballot Elector: The absentee ballot or mail ballot you submitted:

☐ did not have the required signature on the signature envelope, or

☐ included a signature that did not appear to match the signature on your voter registration record and/or on your absentee application.

Please complete the form below and enclose a copy of identification\*, and return it by mail, fax, email, OR in person by no later than 8 p.m. on election day.

Note: if this completed form is not received by the day and time above, your ballot will be handled as a Provisional Ballot. To resolve the Provisional Ballot, you may complete and return this form no later than 5 p.m. the day after election day, by mail, fax, email, or in person; or you may resolve the issue in person at the county election office by 5 p.m. the day after election day.

(county mailing address) \_\_\_\_\_

(county fax number) \_\_\_\_\_

(county email address) \_\_\_\_\_

(county physical address) \_\_\_\_\_

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (printed name of elector) hereby declare that the signature submitted below is my signature and that it is the same as my signature on my absentee ballot signature envelope, if applicable, and that the identification enclosed is a copy of my true and accurate identification.

Signature of Elector \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Elector ID\* enclosed

\* Acceptable forms of ID include: A copy of a current photo identification showing your name and including but not limited to a valid driver's license, a school district or postsecondary education photo identification, or a tribal photo identification, OR A copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, paycheck, notice of confirmation of voter registration, government check, or other government document that shows your name and current address.

**FOR ELECTION OFFICIAL USE ONLY**

A mail ballot or absentee ballot elector whose signature is in question may resolve the issue by completing and submitting this form and a copy of ID\*. (If this form is not received with ID enclosed by 8 p.m. on election night, and if the signature is not otherwise resolved, process ballot as a provisional ballot and follow the procedure in 13-15-107, MCA to resolve the provisional ballot.)

☐ Copy of Acceptable ID Enclosed (Note: process ballot as a regular ballot)

☐ Copy of Acceptable ID Not Enclosed (Note: process ballot as a provisional ballot)

Signature of Election Official: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

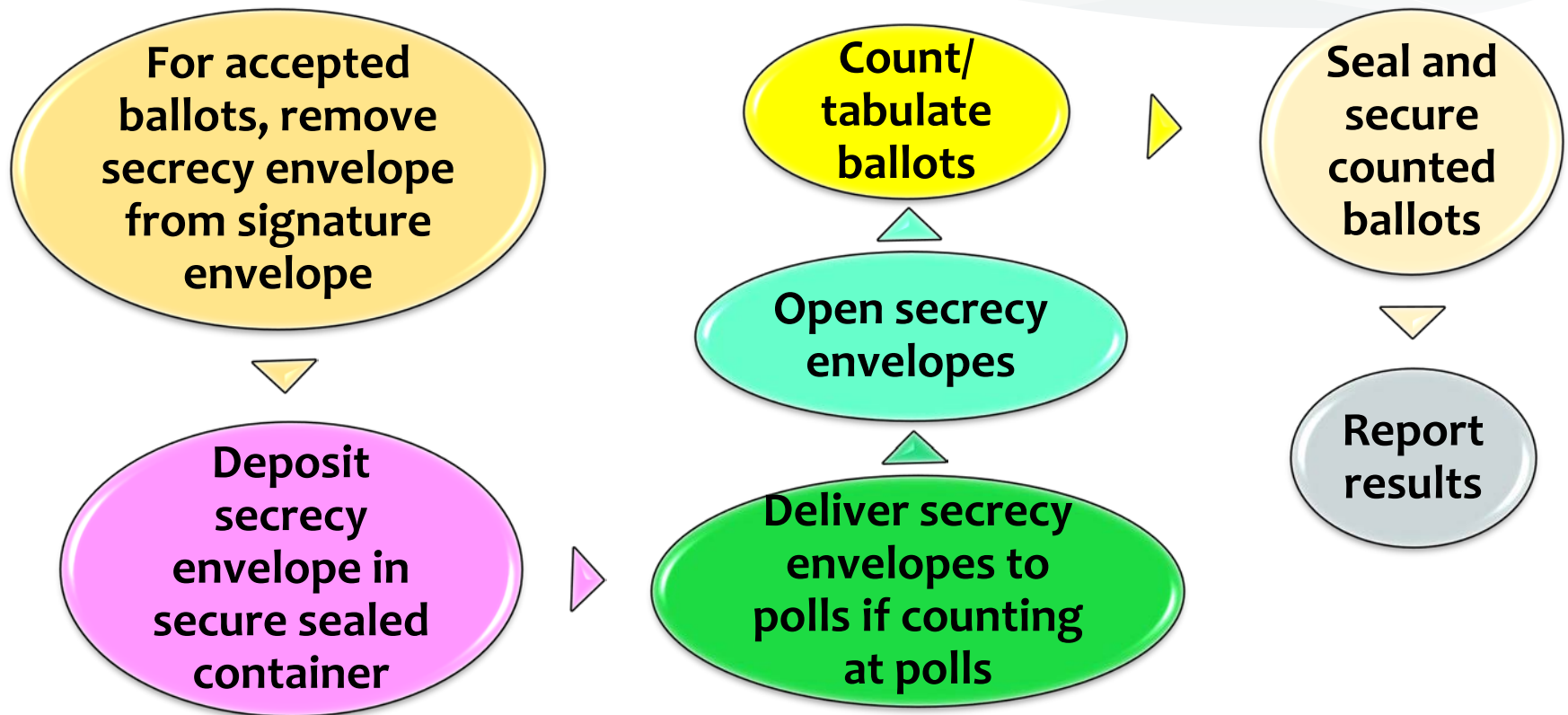
Updated November 5, 2017



# Securing Rejected Ballots

- \* Keep rejected ballots in **alphabetical order** and place them in a **secure area** unless and until they are resolved by the voter.
- \* Rejected absentee ballots that are not resolved by election night should be treated as **provisional**, but do **not** enter them into the **provisional module**.
- \* **After** the election, rejected ballots that have not been resolved are **stored with the provisional ballots**.

# Absentee Flow Chart 2 (after signature verification)



# Opening Signature Envelopes to Remove Secrecy Envelopes

- \* Some counties open signature envelopes to **remove secrecy envelopes (but not the ballots)** as soon as the signature is verified.
- \* Other counties open them on a daily or weekly schedule, and others wait until election day.
- \* For uniformity purposes, we **recommend opening signature envelopes as soon as the signature is verified**, or daily at the latest.

# Securing Secrecy Envelopes Until Early Preparation or Election Day

- \* The secrecy envelopes should be stored in a dry **secure location with restricted access** until early preparation or election day.



# Early Preparation

- \* Election officials can open secrecy envelopes to remove ballots ***no earlier than 1 business day before election day.***
- \* In the presence of any person who requests to be present, an election official opens the secrecy envelope, removes and unfolds the ballot and, **without looking at the votes**, places the ballot in a secured ballot box.
  - Ballots should be **weighted down overnight** to help flatten them for better machine tabulation.

# Early Preparation

- \* Observers of early preparation should normally be **not less than 10 feet or more than 20 feet** from this early preparation, unless these distances are not feasible.
- \* Election officials preparing ballots under this section must **sign an [oath](#), securely seal** ballot boxes, and complete the **[Early Absentee Ballot Preparation Reconciliation](#) form.**

# Finalizing Absentee Data

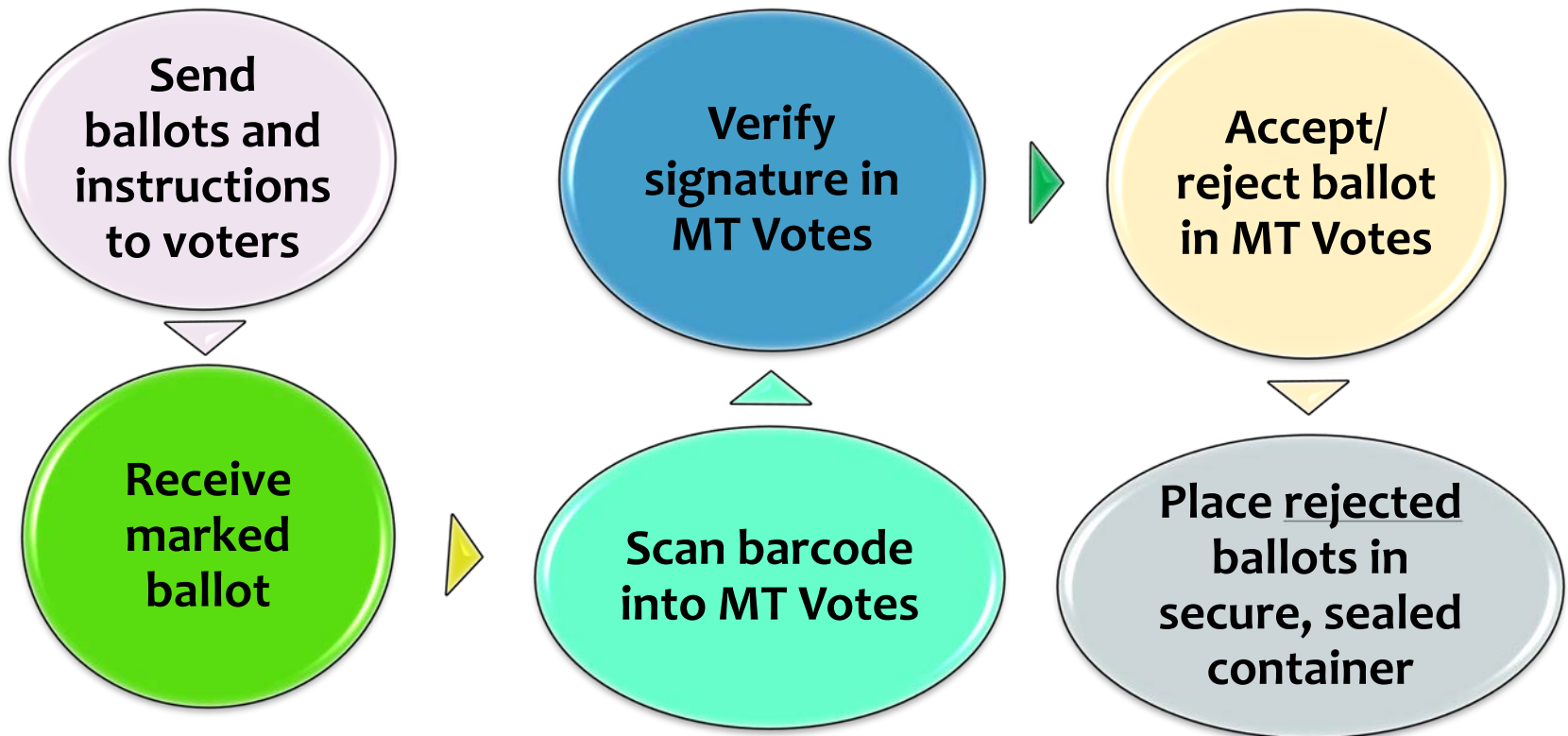
- \* Please be sure to **scan in your absentee Undeliverable** envelopes as soon as they come in, so that:
  - The SOS can get accurate absentee information, **especially for UOCAVA voters**; and
  - Voters are able to check [My Voter Page](#) and find out that their ballot is Undeliverable.
- \* Also **scan in** ballot envelopes that are received **too late to count**, unless you have closed your election.

# Review

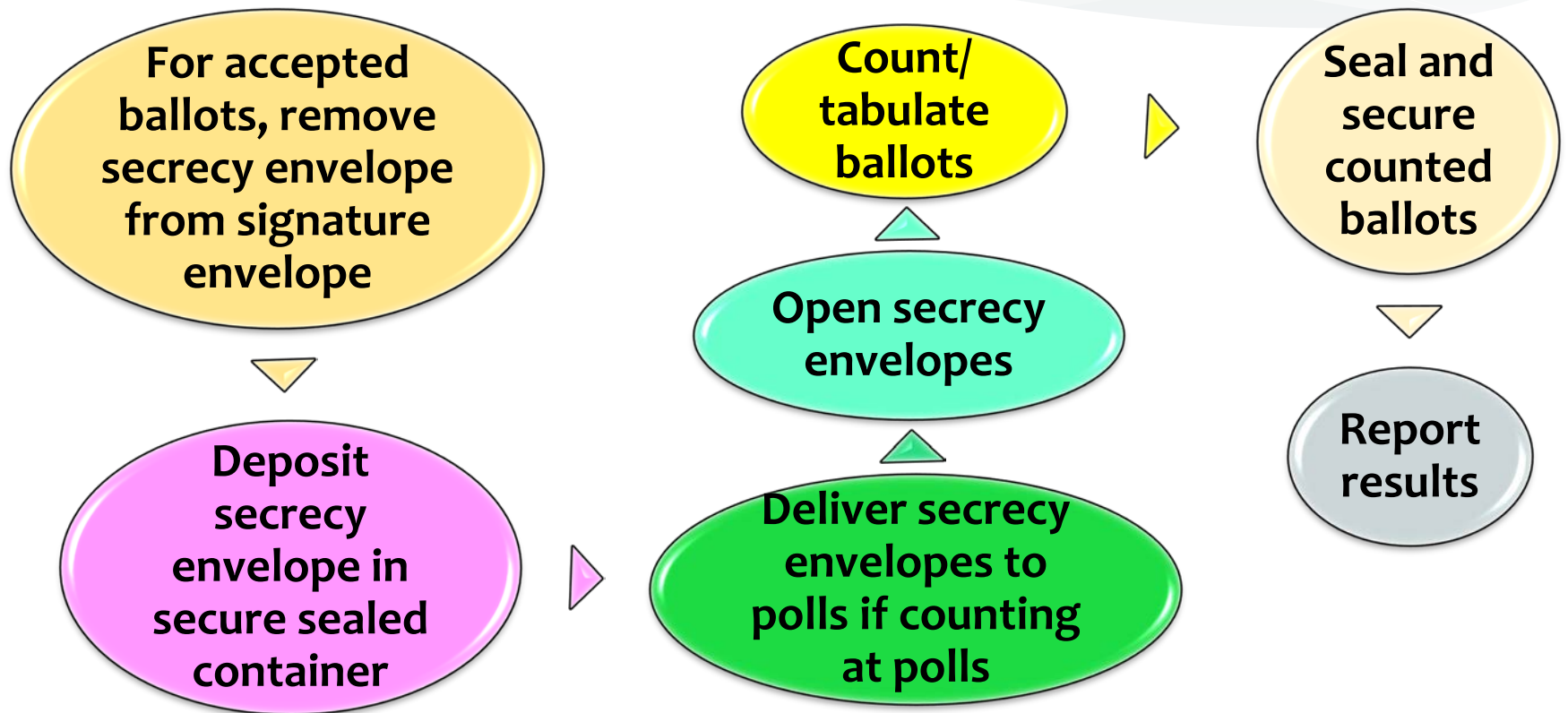
- \* Each of the **flow charts** in this presentation is copied on the next two slides for easy reference.



# Absentee Flow Chart 1 (sending, receiving, rejecting)



# Absentee Flow Chart 2 (after signature verification)



# Absentee FAQs

- \* 1) Can voters request an absentee ballot **without stating a reason?**
  - **Yes.** Since **October 1, 1999**, voters can request absentee ballots without specifying a reason and without having to be absent on election day.

# Absentee FAQs

- \* 2) Once absentee ballots are printed and available for issuance, do we have to provide them **to people who come into our office** to request them, even if they come in before the first day ballots are to be mailed?
  - **Yes.** (If they instead **request** to have the ballots mailed to them, mail them out the same day you mail your other absentee ballots.)

# Absentee FAQs

- \* 3) Can an interest group member mail a voter registration or absentee application **in the same envelope as campaign literature** if that envelope is marked to resemble a mailing from an election office?
  - **No.** This is specifically prohibited in law, 13-35-603.



# Absentee FAQs

- \* 4) Can an interest group **mail**, or advise an individual to mail, a VR application or absentee application to any address **other than the county EA's office**?
  - **No.** This is also specifically prohibited in law, 13-35-604. However, the law does not prohibit an interest group member from taking such applications **in person** and submitting them to the election office.

# Absentee FAQs

- \* 5) Can a member of an interest group pick up people's ballots **at the election office** in order to deliver them to voters?
  - Yes, an interest group member can pick up ballots as long as the voter signs a form stating that the person is authorized to do so, and the person has **not already picked up ballots for four other electors**.

# Absentee FAQs

- \* 6) Can a person from an interest group **pick up ballots from voters** and submit them?
  - Yes. Just as there is no prohibition on a family member dropping off ballots at the election office, there is **no prohibition** on interest groups doing so.
  - However, you may wish to **warn voters** about giving their ballots to people who they do not know.





# Absentee FAQs

- \* 7) Can an absentee voter come into the election office and get a new ballot after the voter's original absentee ballot has been submitted and **received by the election office** but not processed, for example if the voter changes his or her mind?
  - **No. Once a ballot is received by your office, it is determined under Montana law to be voted.** Since electors cannot vote a ballot more than once, they cannot receive a replacement ballot in this situation.

# Absentee FAQs

- \* 8) Are we allowed to do **early preparation** (removing the ballots from the secrecy envelopes) **the weekend or week before** the election?
  - **No.** Early preparation can only be done **one (1) business day before election day.**

# Absentee FAQs

- \* 9) Can we process as **absentee ballots** the ballots that were issued to voters who **signed the precinct register**?
  - No. This would make it **difficult to provide accurate absentee totals**, since MT Votes would track them as absentee voters rather than polling place voters.
  - This could also make it appear that voters who were **not eligible for absentee ballots** (due to the application deadline) were provided with them, thereby raising concerns about the election.

# Absentee FAQs

- \* **10) Can we issue absentee ballots as provisional ballots and **not track them anywhere in MT Votes as absentee?****
  - No. Again, this would make it **difficult to provide accurate absentee totals**, since MT Votes would track them only as provisional voters rather than as absentee voters.
  - This could also make it appear that voters who were **eligible for absentee ballots** were not provided with them, again raising concerns about the election.

# Absentee FAQs

- \* 11) What is the harm in **generating regular absentees** in MT Votes at the **same time** as generating **UOCAVA absentees**?
  - This can cause a multitude of problems with **sent dates** that appear to indicate that the voters were sent ballots much earlier than is accurate.
  - It can cause major issues when **voters move within the county or to another county** after the absentees are generated in MT Votes.
  - Before each federal election, the SOS provides **email guidance** regarding when absentees can be generated.

# Absentee Questions

