Absentee Ballot Best Practices

2016 Montana Election Administrator Certification Training

Montana Secretary of State

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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 absentee best practices.
Absentee Flow Chart 1 (ordering, receipt and storage)

Order absentee ballots

Receive blank ballots

Arrange for folding ballots (as necessary)

Log in ballots and check them for accuracy

Store ballots securely
When ordering ballots you must:

- Provide each election precinct with sufficient ballots for:
  - currently registered electors
  - late registrants
  - replacement ballots for destroyed, spoiled, lost, and not received ballots.
There are several reasons for ordering more ballots than your number of registered voters:

- Election officials are prohibited from putting labels on ballots and from issuing labels to electors; election officials have to issue replacement ballots.
Ordering Ballots

* There are several reasons for ordering more ballots than your number of registered voters (continued):
  - Late registrants are not necessarily registered at the time that you order ballots.
  - Certain groups advise voters to go to the polling place and request polling place ballots, even if those voters have received an absentee ballot.
A county may wish to order the following totals of ballots:

- 100% of active, inactive etc. + an additional amount to be determined by the EA based on past similar elections, and in most cases at least 25% more than 100% of active, inactive, provisional and late registrants.
  - Ballots cost about 12-15 cents per ballot
- A county may wish to order a separate amount for Resolution Ballots and AutoMark Ballots – see spreadsheet as a demonstration.
# Ordering Ballots

## NOVEMBER 6, 2012 BALLOT PRINT

| SEQ | PCT | # ACTIVE VOTERS | # INACT VOTERS | # PROV VOTERS | TOTAL + 30% | TEST | PRINT | RESOL | NO STUB | # ABSENT VOTERS | NUMBER ABSENTEE | NUMBER WAREHSE | NUMBER RESOL | COMMENTS |
|-----|-----|-----------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|------|-------|-------|---------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------|----------|
| 1-2 |     | 203             | 46             | 0             | 324         | 25   | 349   | 25    | 17      | 109            | 1.162         | 163-324       | 1.25         |           |          |
| 2-1 |     | 125             | 51             | 1             | 230         | 25   | 255   | 18    | 17      | 47             | 1.115         | 116-230       | 1.18         |           |          |
| 2-2 |     | 3               | 3              | 0             | 20          | 25   | 45    | 2     | 17      | 9              | 1.100         | 11-20         | 1.2          |           |          |
| 3   |     | 1305            | 501            | 7             | 2357        | 25   | 2382  | 181   | 17      | 669            | 1.117         | 1180-2357     | 1.181        |           |          |
| 4   |     | 1069            | 361            | 0             | 1859        | 25   | 1884  | 143   | 17      | 474            | 1.930         | 931-1859      | 1.143        |           |          |
| 5   |     | 91              | 14             | 0             | 137         | 25   | 162   | 11    | 17      | 59             | 1.690         | 70-137        | 1.11         |           |          |
| 6   |     | 1380            | 467            | 1             | 2402        | 25   | 2427  | 185   | 17      | 668            | 1.120         | 1202-2402     | 1.185        |           |          |
| 7   |     | 1296            | 327            | 3             | 2114        | 25   | 2139  | 163   | 17      | 712            | 1.105         | 1058-2114     | 1.163        |           |          |
| 8   |     | 1698            | 898            | 16            | 3396        | 25   | 3421  | 261   | 17      | 1002           | 1.169         | 1699-3396     | 1.261        |           |          |
| 9   |     | 386             | 152            | 0             | 699         | 25   | 724   | 54    | 17      | 167            | 1.350         | 351-699       | 1.54         |           |          |
| 10-1|     | 209             | 84             | 2             | 384         | 25   | 409   | 30    | 17      | 132            | 1.192         | 193-384       | 1.30         |           |          |
| 10-2|     | 827             | 363            | 5             | 1554        | 25   | 1579  | 120   | 17      | 305            | 1.777         | 778-1554      | 1.120        |           |          |
| 11  |     |                 |                |               |             | 100  | 125   | 10    | 17      |                | 1.50          | 51-100        | 1.10         |           |          |
Tips for Scanning Folded Ballots:

1. Ask the printer to use a microperf on stubs
2. Back bend ballots at each fold. Gently fold the paper the opposite direction of its fold. Avoid hard creases when folding the ballot
3. Rolling the stack of ballots lengthwise can also be helpful
4. Work with small stacks when scanning
Folding Ballots

* Tips for Scanning Folded Ballots:

5. Jog your ballots (M650 or DS850)
6. Clean the scanner of ballot debris every few thousand ballots
7. Keep ballots stored in a temperature/humidity controlled environment
8. If possible, weigh them down with something flat and heavy
Folding Ballots

* Ballots need to be carefully folded so there isn’t a fold on the coding.

These black rectangles are part of the ballot coding.
Folding Ballots

* If using a vendor, direct the vendor not to do a hard fold but a soft fold; the harder the fold the higher chance you have of coding being scarred.

* If you are folding the ballots in-house, consult with tabulator vendor on how and where to fold ballots.
Folding Ballots

- Fold the ballots in half with the front side on the inside fold (so timing tracks are inside the fold)

- Fold the ballots in half again so D-E-F marks are visible
Handling Ballots After Receipt from Vendor

* After you receive ballots from your vendor, sort ballots in precinct order and in precinct split order
* Check to make sure all ballots are accounted for
* Verify ballot faces by comparing to the final proof you signed off on
* Physically pull absentee ballots to prepare for absentee voting
Ballots to be used at polling places need to be sealed (use Ballot Seal Log) along with Ballot Certification Report form, until election morning.

The ballots should be stored in a dry secure location with limited access.
Absentee Flow Chart 2
(sending, receiving, rejecting*)

* See next flow chart for processing accepted ballots

1. Send ballots and instructions to voters
2. Receive marked ballot
3. Scan barcode into MT Votes
4. Verify signature in MT Votes
5. Accept/reject ballot in MT Votes
6. Place rejected ballots in secure, sealed container

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.
Other electors should be mailed ballots on the 25\textsuperscript{th} day before election day (never earlier than the 25\textsuperscript{th} 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 them 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-effective measures
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.
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 – batch should equal 25
* Also, undeliverable ballots are 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.
Ballot Reconciliation Report

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 Certificate of Number Of Ballots Sent to Polling Place Form (use the number from that form) ________________
5. Total number of paper ballots issued ____________________

PART 2
6. Total number of paper ballots issued (same as Part 1, #5) ________________
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

John Paul Gregory

John Paul Gregory
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

Comparison Signature

Office of the Secretary of State
Signature Verification Examples

* Example Above: The comparison signature may be a forgery. 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
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.
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.
If a husband & wife signed each other’s envelope, correct the label on the envelope and accept the ballots.

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, send “Verification of Signature” form to elector to resolve rejected ballot.
Absentee or Mail Ballot Signature Verification or Submission of Missing Signature

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Securing Rejected Ballots

* Keep rejected ballots in alphabetical order and place them in a secure area unless and until they are resolved by, and provided to, the voter.

* After the election, rejected ballots that have not been resolved are stored with the provisional ballots.
Absentee Flow Chart 3 (after signature verification)

1. For accepted ballots, remove secrecy envelope from signature envelope
2. Deposit secrecy envelope in secure sealed container
3. Count/tabulate ballots
4. Open secrecy envelopes
5. Deliver secrecy envelopes to polls if counting at polls
6. Seal and secure counted ballots
7. Report results
Some counties open signature envelopes to remove secrecy envelopes 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.
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 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.
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 an early 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.
Preparing Ballots for Scanning

* Precinct Tabulators: M100 & DS200
  - No need to jog ballots; scanning in any orientation

* Central Tabulators:
  - M650
    - Nest ballots together
    - Single orientation with corner cut in the upper right corner
    - Scan small stacks: 50-100 ballots
  - DS850
    - Nest ballots together
    - Any orientation
    - Start with small stacks: 100 ballots
Each of the flow charts in this presentation are copied on the next three slides for easy reference.
Absentee Flow Chart 1
(ordering, receipt and storage)

1. Order absentee ballots
2. Arrange for folding ballots (as necessary)
3. Receive blank ballots
4. Log in ballots and check them for accuracy
5. Store ballots securely
Absentee Flow Chart 2 (sending, receiving, rejecting)

Send ballots and instructions to voters

Receive marked ballot

Verify signature in MT Votes

Scan barcode into MT Votes

Accept/reject ballot in MT Votes

Accept/reject ballots in secure, sealed container
Absentee Flow Chart 3 (after signature verification)

For accepted ballots, remove secrecy envelope from signature envelope

Deposit secrecy envelope in secure sealed container

Open secrecy envelopes

Count/ tabulate ballots

Deliver secrecy envelopes to polls if counting at polls

Seal and secure counted ballots

Report results
* 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.
2) Once absent 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.)
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.
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.
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.
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.
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 considered under Montana law to be voted. Since electors cannot vote a ballot more than once, they cannot receive a replacement ballot in this situation.
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 Questions