

Department of Legislative Services  
Maryland General Assembly  
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE  
First Reader

House Bill 830 (Delegate R. Long, *et al.*)  
Government, Labor, and Elections

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Election Law - Absentee Ballots - Signature Requirements and Verification

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This emergency bill prohibits a local board of elections from removing an absentee ballot from its envelope or counting the ballot unless the envelope is signed by the voter and a witness and the voter's signature is verified. The witness signature requirement does not apply to active duty uniformed services members serving overseas or their spouses or dependents who live overseas. The bill also requires each local board of elections to obtain technology capable of verifying a voter's signature on the envelope within one year after the bill takes effect.

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Fiscal Summary

**State Effect:** The bill is not expected to materially affect State finances.

**Local Effect:** Local government expenditures increase by at least \$710,000 in FY 2026, \$640,000 in FY 2027, and by \$1.1 million in FY 2028, 2029, and 2030 for signature verification. Additional administrative costs may be incurred annually, beginning in FY 2026, as discussed below. Revenues are not affected. **This bill imposes a mandate on a unit of local government.**

**Small Business Effect:** None.

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Analysis

**Bill Summary:** The bill prohibits a local board of elections from removing an absentee ballot from the return envelope or ballot/return envelope, or counting the ballot, unless:

- the return envelope or ballot/return envelope is signed by (1) the voter to whom the ballot was issued and (2) a witness other than the voter to whom the ballot was issued; and
- the voter's signature is verified by the local board by comparing the signature with the voter's registration record in accordance with regulations adopted by the State Board of Elections (SBE).

The witness signature requirement does not apply to an absentee ballot that is voted and returned by (1) an active duty member of the uniformed services who is serving overseas, or (2) the spouse or dependent of an active duty member of the uniformed services who is serving overseas if the spouse or dependent lives overseas.

The bill requires that guidelines established by SBE for the administration of absentee voting by the local boards provide for verification of signatures on absentee ballot envelopes.

### **Current Law:**

#### *Absentee (Mail-in) Voting*

An individual may vote by absentee (mail-in) ballot except to the extent preempted by federal law. An absentee ballot may be requested in writing (there are State and federal forms that can be used) or online through the SBE website. The voter may choose to receive the ballot by mail, by fax, through the Internet, or by hand at a local board of elections office. The voter may return the ballot by (1) mailing it, postmarked on or before Election Day; (2) depositing it into a ballot drop box before the polls close on Election Day; or (3) delivering it in person to an early voting center or to the local board of elections or an Election Day polling place by the close of polls on Election Day.

Chapters 56 and 514 of 2021 allow for a voter to request permanent absentee ballot status and be placed on a permanent absentee ballot list, in which case a local board of elections sends the voter an absentee ballot each time there is an election.

#### *Absentee Ballot Envelopes*

An absentee ballot sent by mail must be enclosed in specially printed envelopes, the form and content of which must be prescribed by SBE. A local board of elections may use either two envelopes ("outgoing envelope" and "ballot/return envelope") or three envelopes ("outgoing envelope," "return envelope," and "ballot envelope"). The ballot/return envelope or the return envelope must include prepaid postage. When voted and returned to the local board, an absentee ballot must be enclosed in a ballot envelope or ballot/return envelope, which must include an oath prescribed by SBE.

If an absentee ballot is sent by the Internet or facsimile transmission, the local board must provide the voter with an envelope template.

### *Canvassing of Absentee Ballots*

A local board of elections may not reject an absentee ballot except by unanimous vote and in accordance with SBE regulations. A local board must reject an absentee ballot if the voter failed to sign the oath on the ballot envelope or ballot/return envelope and failed to correct the omission before 10 a.m. on the tenth day after Election Day. An election director must make specified efforts to notify a voter who did not sign the oath and explain how the voter can provide the signed oath and when the signed oath must be received for the voter's ballot to be accepted.

### *State Board of Elections Guidelines*

SBE must establish guidelines for the administration of absentee voting by the local boards of elections. The guidelines must provide for (1) the application process; (2) late application for absentee ballots; (3) ballot security, including storage of returned ballots; (4) determining timeliness of receipt of applications and ballots, including applications and ballots for overseas voters; (5) the canvass process; (6) notice of the canvass to candidates, political parties, campaign organizations, news media, and the general public; (7) observers of the process; (8) review of voted ballots and envelopes for compliance with the law and for machine tabulation acceptability; (9) standards for disallowance of ballots during the canvass; (10) storage and retention of ballots following canvass and certification; and (11) the permanent absentee ballot list.

**Local Fiscal Effect:** Local government expenditures increase by at least \$710,000 in fiscal 2026, which reflects the emergency status of the bill, accounting for (1) personnel and training costs (\$110,000) associated with conducting signature verification; (2) costs to lease mail sorting technology with signature verification features under a five-year lease to own program (\$285,000) for certain jurisdictions that do not already have mail sorting technology but have a relatively large volume of mail-in ballots; (3) automated signature verification software (\$120,000) for five jurisdictions with the largest volume of mail-in ballots, to increase signature verification efficiency; and (4) development costs to make modifications to the statewide voter registration system to facilitate signature verification (\$195,000).

Local government expenditures increase by at least \$640,000 in fiscal 2027 and by \$1.1 million in fiscal 2028, 2029, and 2030, consisting of ongoing personnel and training costs, ongoing lease and maintenance costs for the mail sorting technology, and ongoing and increased costs for automated signature verification software.

This estimate:

- assumes that costs of mail sorting technology are similar to costs incurred in the recent past by a small number of counties to lease mail sorting machines to assist with processing of mail-in ballots;

- accounts for costs for all jurisdictions to obtain automated signature verification software for the 2028 and future elections, to meet the bill’s requirement that each local board obtain technology capable of verifying signatures within one year after the bill takes effect – prior to that point, the estimate assumes jurisdictions with smaller volumes of mail-in ballots employ a manual process to verify voter signatures during the 2026 elections;
- does not account for costs of hardware that smaller jurisdictions (without mail sorting technology) may need in order to use the automated signature verification software;
- assumes future mail-in ballot turnout for each county is comparable to recent elections; and
- is based on assumptions about necessary personnel, training, and technology costs, informed by communication with SBE and a small number of counties, as well as past communication with the State of Colorado and a jurisdiction in Oregon that conducts signature verification.

Additional costs associated with signature verification, that have not been quantified, may be incurred for information technology personnel costs in counties that lease the mail sorting technology, and any additional personnel or other costs to communicate with mail-in voters whose signatures cannot initially be verified or whose ballot does not have a witness signature.

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### **Additional Information**

**Recent Prior Introductions:** Similar legislation has been introduced within the last three years. See HB 67 of 2025, HB 202 of 2024, and HB 22 of 2023.

**Designated Cross File:** None.

**Information Source(s):** Carroll, Harford, and St. Mary’s counties; Maryland State Board of Elections; Department of Legislative Services

**Fiscal Note History:** First Reader - February 18, 2026  
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