

Comments on SB HB1047 – Mail-in Voting Enhancement Act

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the value designing mail-ballot and other vote-by-mail materials have to help voters participate in elections more easily and have their votes cast.

The Center for Civic Design is a Maryland-based nonprofit organization that focuses on democracy as a design problem. We work with elections offices and advocates across the county to improve the forms, processes, information, and ballots critical in the voter experience.

In the past 20 years, we have seen election design improve to better support voters and election administration. HB1345 is an essential step in that work in Maryland.

We have worked on the design of mail-in voting materials since 2016. Our first project, in California, supported the adoption of their Voter's Choice Act, which allows counties to move to mail-in voting. Our goal was to update the state envelope design guidelines to create envelopes that are:

- Instantly recognizable, giving ballot envelopes a brand that supports voter outreach and education
- Easy to return accurately, signed, and packed so the ballot can be counted
- Flexible, allowing for differences in vendor processing systems
- Adaptable to state laws and needs for bilingual election materials
- Supporting both 2- and 3-envelope solutions or other envelope configurations to allow voter information and signatures to be hidden
- Designed for USPS automation and tracking
- Designed for easy processing at the election office

Well-designed envelopes effectively reduce the number of rejected ballots, especially when combined with a robust voter information campaign.

- In Escambia County, FL, new envelope layouts combined with a new cure process dropped the number of **ballots without a signature by 42%** in the primary and **overall rejections by 70%** in the general.
- In 2019, Michigan adopted the Center for Civic Design's layout for their state-wide template. In the 2020 Primary, the number of rejected ballots dropped from **0.49%** to **0.06%**.

• In 2020, we worked with New York State on designs for a state-wide template. In New York City, rejected ballots dropped from ~22% in the primary to less than 4% in the general election—even before they began the cure notifications, which further reduced the number of ballots that could not be counted.

Maryland already has some important election policies to support voters, including online, automatic, and same-day voter registration and early voting centers. Mail-in voting is supported by an online request form, drop boxes, and a state-wide ballot tracking system. The requirements in this bill will expand the support for voters with expanded availability and security of drop boxes, instructions, and reports on the status of their ballot.

It also requires a review of all informational materials and forms related to mail in voters leading to recommendations for improvement.

We hope that this review will include feedback from voters and organizations around Maryland, and include usability testing of the current materials and recommendations, to ensure that the report includes feedback from diverse communities.

The goal of any recommendations should be to ensure that voters who choose mail-in voting are able to easily understand the procedures and return a ballot that can be accepted and counted.

State-wide templates, designed to best practices, are used in many states (such as Pennsylvania, Virginia, Florida, Ohio) to ensure that the voters all receive a mail-ballot package of a consistent standard. The standards can allow for flexibility so that enables counties to identify the envelope configurations that work best for their voters and their election administration processes.

Plain language is important in elections and government generally because 43% of literate adults read only at what the National Assessment of Adult Literacy calls *basic* or *below basic* levels. It does not mean "dumbing down" the information, but writing clearly. In research studies, both low and high-literacy people found information faster, answered more questions correctly, and gave higher satisfaction ratings when the information was written clearly.

Implementing a cure process to correct missing signatures before the end of the canvass period is a best practice for mail-in/absentee voting and can save ballots from being rejected due to a simple mistake.

Mail ballot envelope designs

In 2020, we adapted our ballot envelope designs for 20 states, with initial layouts incorporating the legal requirements for the state. They were offered to the states for

free, to adopt and adapt, if possible, within the busy election cycle. In the end, our designs were adopted either in whole or partially in 12 states. Select counties in five more states also adapted our designs. We look forward to more states doing so in 2021-2022.

These are the designs for Maryland.

All envelopes are designed to be either English-only or bilingual.

The distinctive color stripes and official election logo or seal, plus the official Election Mail logo, identify it as a mail-ballot for both voters and USPS.

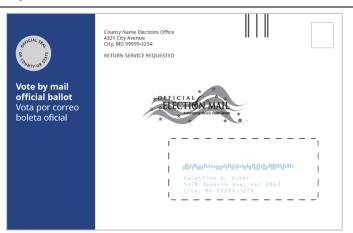
The front of the envelope

Envelope Layout

Outgoing envelope

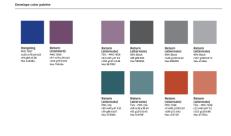
The color stripe on the outgoing envelope is blue, identifying it as going to the voter's address.

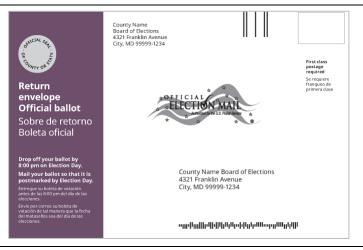
The address and IMB can be printed on the front or shown through a window.



Return envelope

The color stripe on the return envelope can be one of several colors.



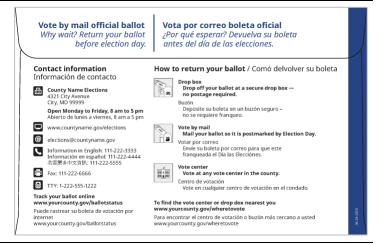


The back of the envelope

Envelope Layout

Outgoing envelope

The back of this envelope is used for information about how to contact the election office and how to return the ballot, customized to each state or county.



Return envelope

The back of a basic return envelope includes the voter's oath and signature.

Under HB1345, the instructions for voters who need assistance would be replaced with a signature form for the person assisting them, as is commonly done in other states.



Date (MM/DD/YYYY)	5678 Seventh Ave, Apt 9863 City, MD 99999-1278
×	Valentina Q. Voter
oter, sign here in ink. Power of attorney is not acceptable.	Որկանաստանինի մակիրկանինանու
.ny person who is convicted of violating the absentee voting laws ssubject to a fine of up to \$1,000, to imprisonment of up to two ears, or both.	
Varning	If you cannot sign the oath, the person helping you must print your name on the Signature line above and write his or her initials after your name may leave the "Printed Name of Yoter" line blank.
and do not intend to vote elsewhere in this election. I voted the enclosed ballot and mailed or delivered it on or before election day .	 complete the Certification of Person Assisting Absentee Voter form and place it in this envelope
Inder penalty of perjury, I hereby swear (or affirm) that I am qualified to vote in the election and that I have not voted	The person helping you must:
oter's oath	If you have a disability or cannot read or write, someone can help you mark your ballot and sign this oath.

Did you	Revise si	
☐ Sign the oath below?	□ ¿Firmó el juramento en la parte inferior?	
□ Include a copy of your ID if your envelope says "ID Required"?	□ ¿Incluyó una copia de su identificación (ID) si el sobre dice "ID Required" ("identificación requerida")?	
Voter's oath	Juramento del votante	
Under penalty of perjury, I hereby swear (or affirm) that	Por medio de la presente, bajo pena de perjurio, juro (o afirmo) en el presente documento que	
I am qualified to vote in the election and that I have not voted and do not intend to vote elsewhere in this election. I voted the enclosed ballot and mailed or delivered it on or before	Estoy facultado para votar en esta elección y que no he votado, ni pretendo votar, en ninguna otra parte, en esta elección. He votado en la boleta electoral adjunta y la he enviado por correo, o la he entregado el día anterior o el mismo día de la elección.	
election day.	Advertencia	
Warning Any person who is convicted of violating the absentee voting laws is	Cualquier persona que sea condenada por violar las leyes de elección en ausencia estrar sujeta a pagar una multa de hasta \$1.000, encarcelamiento de hasta dos años: o a ambas cosas.	
Any person who is convicted or violating the absentee voting laws is subject to a fine of up to \$1,000, to imprisonment of up to two years, or both.	Si tiene una discapacidad o no puede leer o escribir, alguien puede ayudarle a marcar su boleta electoral y firmar este juramento. La persona que le ayude debe:	
If you have a disability or cannot read or write, someone can help you mark your ballot and sign this oath. The person helping you	 Illenar el formulario de Certificación de Persona Asistente al Votante en Ausencia y colocario en este sobre 	
must: - complete the Certification of Person Assisting Absentee Voter form and - place it in this envelope	Si no puede firmar el juramento, la persona asistidindole debe escribir su nombre en letra de molde en la linea de firma ubicada arriba y escribir sus propias inicia les después del nombre del elector, y puede dejar la línea "Nombre impreso del votante" en blanco.	
If you cannot sign the oath, the person helping you must print your name	Total City Cod Cod Todal City Cod Cod	
on the Signature line above and write his or her initials after your name may leave the "Printed Name of Voter" line blank.	վիկնարհետարկնիի մրկիիիիիի կիրերու	
Voter, sign here in ink. Power of attorney is not acceptable.	Valentina Q. Voter	
Votante, firme aquí con tinta No se aceptan poderes notariales.	5678 Seventh Ave, Apt 9863	
×	City, MD 99999-1278	
Date / Fecha (MM/DD/YYYY)		
Print name / Imprimir nombre	որթիրդիի վիրիկներ թիկրերին ուրդիների	

Other envelope layouts

Envelope style

Layout

Letter-style envelope (#10, 11, 12)

In this style, the information on the back of the envelope is printed in a vertical orientation.



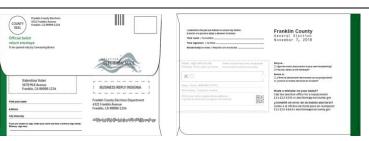
3-envelope configuration (#10, 11, 12)

This envelope collection uses the largest size for regular letter postage for the outgoing envelope and smaller ones for the return and ballot envelopes.



Half flap & full flap envelopes

In this style, the return envelope has an extended flap covering the voter oath and signature or the entire back of the envelope.



Resources and research

Center for Civic Design resources

https://civicdesign.org/projects/vote-by-mail/ https://civicdesign.org/tool-kit-for-scaling-up-vbm/

Our website has all of the materials we created for designing a vote-by-mail program, including an overview of the decisions, the envelope designs, instructions inserts, cure letters, webinars, and information about working with the US Postal Service requirements.

Research paper: Making ballot envelopes clear and understandable

 $\frac{https://civicdesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/VBM-Signature-Statements-CCD-final-2021-01-19.pdf$

An analysis of the readability of the voter signature forms on mail ballot envelopes and a process for making them easier to understand.

Showcase: Counting more absentee ballots in Escambia County, Florida

https://civicdesign.org/showcase/counting-more-absentee-ballots-in-escambia-county-florida/

Statistics from the 2012 and 2016 elections, comparing rejected ballots before and after introducing a cure process and new ballot designs.

Federal Plain Language Guidelines on plainlanguage.gov

https://plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/

These are the official guidelines for the Plain Writing Act of 2010 developed and maintained by federal and national experts. Other information on the site includes extensive resources (including arguments and evidence of plain language benefits) and examples.