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. 	

Other envelope layouts

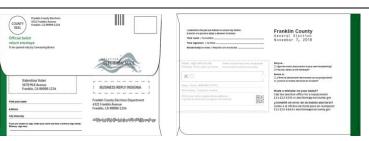| Envelope style	Layout
Letter-style envelope (#10, 11, 12) In this style, the information on the back of the envelope is printed in a vertical orientation.	
3-envelope configuration (#10, 11, 12) This envelope collection uses the largest size for regular letter postage for the outgoing envelope and 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
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.