

TLP: WHITE



**GUIDANCE CONCERNING EXAMINATION OF  
ABSENTEE AND MAIL-IN BALLOT RETURN  
ENVELOPES**

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**Version: 4.0**

# EXAMINATION OF ABSENTEE AND MAIL-IN BALLOT RETURN ENVELOPES

## 1 BACKGROUND:

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The Pennsylvania Election Code describes processes that a qualified voter follows to apply for, receive, complete, and timely return an absentee or mail-in ballot to their county board of election. These processes include multiple secure methods used by the voter's county board of election to verify that the qualified voter's absentee or mail-in application is complete and that the statutory requirements are satisfied. These methods include voter identification verification confirmed by either a valid driver's license number, the last four digits of the voter's Social Security number or other valid photo identification, and unique information on the application, including the voter's residence and date of birth. Before sending the ballot to the applicant, the county board of elections confirms the qualifications of the applicant by verifying the proof of identification and comparing the information provided on the application with the information contained in the voter record. If the county is satisfied that the applicant is qualified, the application must be approved. This approval shall be final and binding, except that challenges may be made only on the grounds that the applicant was not a qualified voter, and those challenges must be made to the county prior to five o'clock p.m. on the Friday prior to the election.

Once the qualified voter's absentee or mail-in ballot application is approved, the voter is mailed a ballot with instructions and two envelopes. The outer envelope includes both a unique correspondence ID barcode that links the envelope to the qualified voter's application and a pre-printed Voter's Declaration that the voter must sign and date representing that the voter is qualified to vote the enclosed ballot and has not already voted. This Guidance addresses the examination of the Voter's Declaration on the outer ballot return envelope. This Guidance assumes that the voter has satisfactorily completed the steps described above as to application for, receipt of and return of an absentee or mail-in ballot.

## 2 RECORDING THE RETURN DATE, RETURN METHOD AND BALLOT STATUS FOR RETURNED MAIL BALLOTS:

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County boards of elections should have processes in place to record the return date, return method, and ballot status for all voted mail ballots received. County boards of elections must store and maintain returned mail ballots in a secure location until the ballots are to be pre-canvassed or canvassed.

County boards of elections should stamp the date of receipt on the ballot-return envelope. County boards of elections should record the receipt of absentee and mail-in ballots daily in the Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors (SURE) system. To record a

ballot as returned, the staff should scan the correspondence ID barcode on the outside of the outer ballot return envelope. The correspondence ID on the envelope is unique to each absentee or mail-in voter and each issuance of a ballot to a voter. Once a correspondence ID has been recorded as returned in the SURE system, it cannot be recorded again. Further, if a ballot issuance record is cancelled by the county board of elections (e.g., voided to reissue a replacement ballot) in the SURE system, the correspondence ID on the cancelled ballot will become invalid. If the same barcode is subsequently scanned, the SURE system will not allow the returned ballot to be marked as being approved for counting.

The county boards of elections should record the date a mail ballot is received (not the date that a returned ballot is processed). In the event a county board of elections is entering a mail ballot on a date other than the date it was received, county personnel should ensure that the SURE record reflects the date of receipt, rather than the date of entry, since by default, SURE will automatically populate both the 'Date Received' and 'Vote Recorded' fields with the current date and time unless users manually correct the date to reflect the date received.

### 3 EXAMINATION OF DECLARATION ON MAIL BALLOT RETURN ENVELOPES:

The county board of elections is responsible for approving ballots to be counted during pre-canvassing and canvassing.

To promote consistency across the 67 counties, the county boards of elections should follow the following steps when processing returned absentee and mail-in ballots.

After setting aside ballots of electors who died prior to the opening of the polls, the county board of elections shall examine the Voter's Declaration on the outer envelope of each returned ballot and compare the information on the outer envelope, i.e., the voter's name and address, with the information contained on the list of absentee and mail-in voters.

If the Voter's Declaration on the return envelope is not signed or dated, or is dated with a date deemed to be incorrect, that ballot return envelope must be set aside and the ballot not counted. If the board determines that a ballot should not be counted, the final ballot disposition should be noted in SURE. The ballot return status (Resp Type) should be noted using the appropriate drop-down selection. It is important that the ballot return status is promptly and accurately recorded in SURE using the specific response type as to the disposition for each ballot received.

Due to ongoing litigation, ballots that have been administratively determined to be undated or incorrectly dated should be set aside and segregated from other ballots. Counties may prefer to keep segregated undated and incorrectly dated ballots organized by precinct and alphabetically by last name within each precinct. The department strongly recommends that counties also segregate into separate groups undated ballots versus incorrectly dated ballots.

When voters return their ballots in person to election offices, it is recommended that office personnel remind voters to confirm that they signed and correctly dated their ballots,

If the county election board is satisfied that the declaration is sufficient, the mail-in or absentee ballot should be approved for the pre-canvass or canvass unless the application was challenged in accordance with the Pennsylvania Election Code.

The Pennsylvania Election Code does not authorize the county board of elections to set aside returned absentee or mail-in ballots based solely on signature analysis by the county board of elections.

<b>Version</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Description</b>
1.0	9.11.2020	Initial document release
2.0	5.24.2022	Updates related to court decisions
3.0	9.26.2022	Updates related to court decisions
4.0	4.3.2023	Updates to conform to administrative changes and litigation