



Wisconsin Elections Commission

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Wisconsin Municipal Clerks
City of Milwaukee Election Commission
Wisconsin County Clerks
Milwaukee County Election Commission

FROM: Meagan Wolfe
Administrator

DATE: March 29, 2020

SUBJECT: Guidance for Indefinitely Confined Electors

Due to the continuing spread of COVID-19, staff of the Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) has received numerous inquiries regarding the application of the indefinitely confined designation for absentee voters under Wisconsin Statutes. At its meeting of March 27, 2020, the Commission discussed this issue and adopted the following guidance related to the use of indefinitely confined status to assist local election officials working with absentee voters:

1. Designation of indefinitely confined status is for each individual voter to make based upon their current circumstance. It does not require permanent or total inability to travel outside of the residence. The designation is appropriate for electors who are indefinitely confined because of age, physical illness or infirmity or are disabled for an indefinite period.
2. Indefinitely confined status shall not be used by electors simply as a means to avoid the photo ID requirement without regard to whether they are indefinitely confined because of age, physical illness, infirmity or disability.

This guidance is consistent with and supplements previous statements of the WEC related to absentee voters who may qualify as indefinitely confined or “permanent” absentee voters. For ease of reference, on March 24, 2020, the WEC posted the following guidance in one of its FAQ documents addressing issues related to conducting the Spring Election in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic:

Wisconsin Elections Commissioners

Dean Knudson, chair | Marge Bostelmann | Julie M. Glancey | Ann S. Jacobs | Robert Spindell | Mark L. Thomsen

Administrator
Meagan Wolfe

Indefinitely Confined Absentee Applications

WEC staff has received numerous questions from clerks about the increase in voters requesting absentee ballots as indefinitely confined. Wisconsin Statutes provide the option for a voter to self-certify whether they meet the definition of indefinitely confined. The statutory definition of "age, illness, infirmity or disability" does not require any voter to meet a threshold for qualification and indefinitely confined status need not be permanent. A voter with a broken leg or one recovering from surgery may be temporarily indefinitely confined and may use that status when voting during that period of time.

We understand the concern over the use of indefinitely confined status and do not condone abuse of that option as it is an invaluable accommodation for many voters in Wisconsin. During the current public health crisis, many voters of a certain age or in at-risk populations may meet that standard of indefinitely confined until the crisis abates. We have told clerks if they do not believe a voter understood the declaration they made when requesting an absentee ballot, they can contact the voter for confirmation of their status. They should do so using appropriate discretion as voters are still entitled to privacy concerning their medical and disability status. Any request for confirmation of indefinitely confined status should not be accusatory in nature.

There may be a need to do some review of the absentee voting rolls after this election to confirm voters who met the definition of indefinitely confined during the public health crisis would like to continue that status. WEC staff has already discussed this possibility and may be able to provide resources to assist clerks with these efforts.

This guidance is based upon applicable statutes. An elector who is indefinitely confined because of age, physical illness or infirmity or is disabled for an indefinite period may by signing a statement to that effect require that an absentee ballot be sent to the elector automatically for every election. *Wis. Stat. § 6.86(2)(a)*. The absentee ballot request form asks voters to certify to their indefinitely confined status. Statutes do not establish the option to require proof or documentation from indefinitely confined voters. Clerks may tactfully verify with voters that the voter understood the indefinitely confined status designation when they submitted their request but they may not request or require proof.

An elector who qualifies as indefinitely confined “may, in lieu of providing proof of identification, submit with his or her absentee ballot a statement signed by the same individual who witnesses voting of the ballot which contains the name and address of the elector and verifies that the name and address are correct.” *Wis. Stat. 6.87(4)(b)2*. Thus, indefinitely confined electors may satisfy the photo ID requirement by obtaining the signature of a witness on the absentee ballot certificate envelope.

Electors who are indefinitely confined due to age, physical illness, infirmity or disability, may be unable to obtain a current photo ID or make a copy to submit with their written absentee ballot request or upload an image of their photo ID with their electronic request through MyVote Wisconsin. If a clerk is contacted by an elector in such circumstances,

WEC recommends discussing the options and making the voter aware of the criteria for qualifying as an indefinitely confined elector.

If any elector is no longer indefinitely confined, they shall so notify the municipal clerk. *Wis. Stat. 6.86(2)(a)*. An elector also loses indefinitely confined status if they do not vote in a Spring or General Election and do not respond to a mailing from the municipal clerk asking whether they wish to continue automatically receiving absentee ballots. *Wis. Stat. 6.86(2)(b)*. Finally, the municipal clerk shall remove the name of any elector from the list of indefinitely confined electors upon receipt of reliable information that an elector no longer qualifies for that designation and service. The clerk shall notify the elector of such action not taken at the elector's request within 5 days, if possible. *Wis. Stat. § 6.86(2)(b)*.

If you have questions regarding this communication, please contact the Help Desk at 608-261-2028 or elections@wi.gov.