



Wisconsin Elections Commission

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DATE: August 18, 2020

TO: All Wisconsin Election Officials

FROM: Meagan Wolfe
Administrator

SUBJECT: Updated Uniform Instructions for Absentee Voters

Anticipating a continued uptick in absentee participation for the fall elections, WEC staff have been focused on improving the absentee voting process in a variety of ways. One area identified for improvement was the uniform instructions included with every absentee ballot issued in Wisconsin. Attached to this communication are two updated versions of the uniform instructions that were approved for use by the Wisconsin Elections Commission during their July 30, 2020 meeting.

The two separate instruction documents are:

- **Uniform Instructions for Wisconsin Absentee Voters**

This is the version of the instructions that will be sent to voters who choose to receive their absentee ballots by mail and, as such, it is likely that this will be the version you use the most. These instructions are specific to by-mail absentee voters and do not include any information on emailed or faxed ballots.

- **Uniform Instructions for Military and Overseas Voters (for emailed or faxed ballots)**

These instructions will be sent to voters who are eligible to request their ballots by email or fax and choose to do so. This version is quite similar but is geared more toward the unique process of voting a ballot received electronically. Specifically addressed are printing the ballot/certificate, ensuring appropriate postage is affixed, and outlining return options other than public mail services.

These documents serve several purposes. They explain how to complete the certificate envelope, how to get a replacement ballot, and whom to contact with any questions. They also provide information on applicable deadlines, photo ID requirements, and how to return a ballot received electronically. This is a lot of information to successfully convey in a single, two-sided document.

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This information, however, is crucial to voters and helps minimize the risk that certificate envelopes are completed incorrectly and that ballots are rejected on Election Day. With sincere thanks to the clerks and usability experts who provided such valuable feedback during this process, staff are pleased to present the updated uniform instructions for absentee voters.

What's New?

The most obvious change is that there are now two separate versions of these instructions. Having multiple versions may not seem more intuitive, but this approach allows clerks to provide the most pertinent information to voters based on how they requested their ballots. Instead of a one-size-fits-all document that tries to cover the full spectrum of voter types and ballot delivery methods, clerks may now send out individualized instructions that focus on the information a voter needs while limiting the risk of confusion.

The biggest focus of the redesign was to frontload the information most tangential to the voter by immediately outlining the steps they must follow to correctly vote their ballot, complete their certificate envelope, and return the ballot to their clerk. To make this section more usable, clearly numbered instructions and graphics have been added to specific steps to draw and keep the voter's attention.

Per staff interactions with voters and clerks, there are a lot of questions out there on the witness requirement. To provide more context on who can serve as a witness and what that process entails, an additional section has been added that fleshes out the requirements and provides common examples of who can serve as a witness.

Another key focus in this redesign was to explicitly identify the required sections of the certificate envelope to minimize the chance of a voter returning an insufficient envelope that would ultimately be rejected at the polls. This section of the instructions clearly outlines the required fields and reiterates multiple times that omitting required information or incorrectly completing the certificate may lead to the ballot not being counted.

Based on the type of voter and how they received their ballot, the instructions for returning it and how a voter may do so are quite different. Each document offers specific instruction to ensure that all types of voters know the exact steps necessary to making sure their ballots are returned on time.

The back side is split into three main sections. The first details how a voter can get assistance with completing their ballot or certificate envelope and details who can assist them, how that person may provide assistance, and calls attention to the sections on the ballot and certificate that an assistor must complete. The second section explains how to get a replacement ballot and outlines the respective deadlines for doing so. The final section covers the photo ID requirement and confirms that, unless otherwise instructed by their clerk, a voter does not have to provide an additional copy of photo ID when returning the ballot.

As on the current version, there is a section for municipalities to list their specific contact information to ensure voters are contacting the clerk with any questions.

Next Steps

Per the Commission's directive, these instructions are to be used for all absentee voters moving forward, beginning with the absentee ballots that clerks will be sending for the November 3rd General Election.

As always, please contact us with any questions or concerns. The Help Desk can be reached at (608) 261-2028 or by email at elections@wi.gov.