Ballots & Voting: Resources for County Election Officials

Leading practices to help counties meet and exceed state requirements

Read the full performance audit, **Evaluating Washington's Rejected Ballots**, on our website at sao.wa.gov/performance_audit/evaluating-washingtons-ballot-rejection-rates

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Voting is a key element of American democracy: Help voters get it right!

A recent performance audit looked at practices Washington counties could consider using to help voters submit valid ballots, or to increase the likelihood challenged ballots could be quickly and properly cured. The audit had a limited scope, which means this is not an exhaustive list of successful practices some counties already use or more innovative practices they might consider. Nonetheless, we hope they are useful to county election officials when they consider improving their own policies and procedures around voter outreach and curing challenged ballots.

> *Practices in this guide marked with this symbol*
>
> *are considered innovative and thus less well tested. Officials should consider many factors before putting them into action.*

What's in this guide

The three sections in this guide address practices election officials could employ during the following phases:

**Phase 1 – Planning for elections**
- Planning voter outreach and education
- Preparing ballot materials
- Determining ballot drop box locations
- Supplementing funding with grants

Phase 3 – After an election
- Updating voter identification contact information
- Updating voter signatures
- Using data to improve processes

Phase 2 – During elections
- Conducting targeted voter outreach
- Reviewing ballots and signatures
- Curing ballots
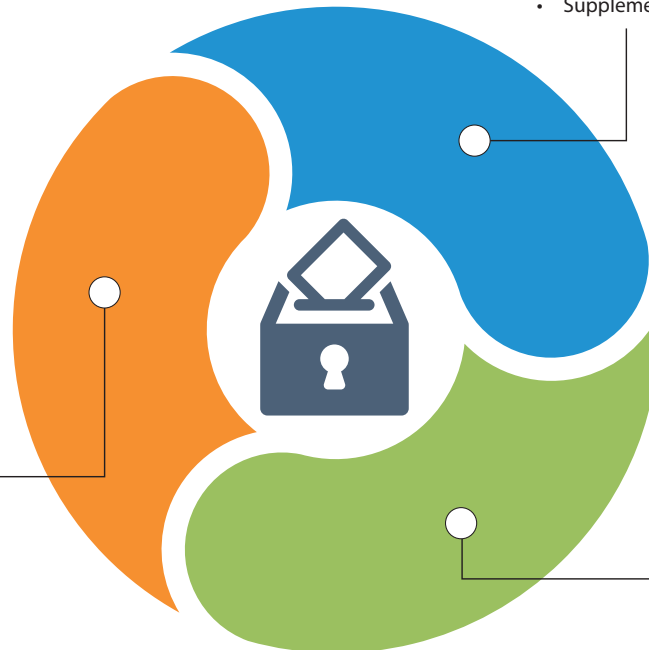
While counties make many decisions about election processes, they must also follow state requirements that help ensure uniformity of elections across the state.

For example, state law requires counties to use a statewide election administration system, **VoteWA**. This system houses all Washington voter and election information, allowing for more uniform and streamlined procedures across the state. VoteWA allows counties to save multiple examples of voter signatures on file from registration forms and cure letters, creating a lifetime database of signatures. In addition, it collects signatures from the Department of Licensing's database, so that the signature used for a driver's license or state identification card is available to any county. The system also generates cure letters, which a county may customize to send to voters whose ballots were challenged by election officials.

A note about "curing"

Election officials must attempt to contact voters with challenged ballots to verify or update information so valid votes can be accepted – a process known as curing. Voters have until election certification (three weeks following Election Day for general elections) to cure ballots. The county canvassing board, or its delegate, then performs a final review on all challenged ballots, including any additional information received during curing, and makes the final decision to accept or reject each one.

Other key statewide requirements counties must follow include:

- **Attempt to cure challenged ballots by sending voters a cure letter.** If they do not respond, call voters three days before the election is certified.

- **Train employees on how to determine whether signatures match**

- **Begin opening voting locations at least 18 days before an election,** including at least one voting center and at least one drop box at a different location.

- **Form an advisory committee to consult on election access issues for voters with disabilities.** Small counties may join together for a single committee.

- **Open a student engagement hub at state and regional colleges and universities if located within a county's jurisdiction**

- **Ensure voting locations comply with state requirements.** Requirements include at least one ballot drop box for every 15,000 voters; one in every city, town and Census-designated place with a post office; one on tribal lands upon their request; one at a voting center that is accessible to people with disabilities; and one at any student engagement hub.

Experts from many fields – including the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, university research centers and the National Conference of State Legislatures – recommend leading practices around many issues. These practices include contacting voters who have problems with their ballots, ensuring counties send voters critical information, and conducting outreach and education to prevent problems from arising in the first place.

For more information about Washington's elections requirements, please visit the Secretary of State's website at www.sos.wa.gov/elections/

Phase 1 – Planning for elections

Phase 1 – Planning for elections
· Planning voter outreach and education
· Preparing ballot materials
· Determining ballot drop box locations
· Supplementing funding with grants

During voter registration, intentionally gather different versions of voters' signatures, using a variety of forms and sources

Because each person's signature can vary, collecting multiple signatures from voters can help election employees better verify each voter's unique signature styles.

- **Collect several examples of a voter's signature during voter registration and on signature update forms by incorporating multiple places for voters to sign.**

In Washington, counties use voter registration and signature update template forms developed by the Secretary of State. Counties can work with the Secretary of State's office to update these forms to allow them to collect several examples of voters' signatures.

Identify and use grant funds to improve election processes, including voter education

If your county has limited resources, consider looking for grant opportunities. Some organizations offer grants to improve election processes, such as developing more community involvement and education that can address specific demographic groups, including under-represented racial and ethnic groups.

For example, The Center for Tech and Civic Life awarded more than $350 million in grant funds across the country to help counties make improvements to elections processes like increasing voting access during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If your county resources allow, consider providing your own grant funds to community organizations to better target voter education efforts to particular demographic groups.

Plan ahead for voter education and participation

Look for community partners well in advance of an upcoming election and develop a plan of how you might work together to increase voter awareness and participation.

- **Develop and implement a formal outreach plan to better target voter education and outreach needed**
- **Establish community partnerships to increase voter awareness about the voting process and deadlines.** In one example, a county collaborated with a local theater to announce voting deadlines on the theater's announcement board.

Plan ahead for clear, easy-to-return ballot materials

The cost of printing election materials means counties need to make sure they get the biggest impact from their expenditure. Nonprofit groups such as CivicDesign.org offer templates and format suggestions for items like return envelopes and cure materials. Review your materials early enough in the election cycle so you can make recommended improvements in good time before they will be needed.

- **Revise ballot return envelopes to add details where voters need them.** For example, add clear labeling to help voters sign in the right place and with a signature that matches the one on file.
- **Prepaid envelopes for voter cure letter replies** increase the likelihood the voter will respond promptly without searching for a stamp.

Take multiple factors into account when deciding accessible voting locations

When deciding where to have voting locations, including ballot drop boxes, counties can help increase accessibility for more voters by taking into account factors like:

- **Voter demographics**
- **Isolated geographic areas**
- **Access to public transit and parking**
- **The ability to drive up to the drop box**

Use geographic information system (GIS) analysis to identify coverage gaps in voting locations

Geospatial analysis tools use specific criteria – such as voter demographics, mobility, geographic isolation and more – to determine the places with the greatest need for a ballot drop box. Many election offices, including King County and Pierce County, already use GIS to help them make decisions about drop box locations.

Provide solid, easily findable information about election processes on county websites

Counties use their official websites to inform voters about drop box locations, key dates and ballot-handling basics. Update the official county elections website page to ensure it clearly tells voters:

- **Key dates, including when ballots are mailed out, when drop boxes open, when ballots are due, and suggested deadlines for mailing ballots so they are postmarked timely.**
- **Complete information about signature challenges and the curing process**

Phase 2 – During elections
- Conducting targeted voter outreach
- Reviewing ballots and signatures
- Curing ballots

Use a variety of outreach techniques and media to reach voter groups

Using different media to conduct voter outreach helps ensure counties reach more voters and a variety of voters. Consider the different audiences reached by:

- **Social media**
- **Television and radio advertising**
- **Mailed voter pamphlets**
- **County websites**
- **In-person events**

Such wide-ranging efforts can even reach those not yet registered to vote. For example, consider reaching young voters by holding mock elections in high schools.

Educate voters about the basics of elections

Outreach can help counties cover topics around critical voting requirements that help reduce ballot rejections. Education topics include:

- **The basic how-to of voting,** including county drop box locations
- **Important key dates,** such as when ballots will be mailed out, when drop boxes open, when ballots are due, and suggested deadlines for mailing them so they are postmarked timely
- **The importance of the ballot envelope signature and how it will be compared to signature(s) on file**
- **Why ballots may be challenged and how to resolve issues**

Use ballot packets to give voters last-minute reminders

- **Suggest voters check their driver's license to see the signature you have on file**
- **Remind them the signature on the ballot envelope must match that file signature**
- **Add an illustration showing the location for voter signature on the ballot envelope**

Use automated systems to notify voters of ballot status, including problems

After a ballot is challenged, one important step is to tell the voter so the problem can be resolved. California, for example, makes this process seamless by recording all mail-in ballots in its voting system. The system automatically notifies voters through their preferred medium (email, text or telephone call) of their ballot status: accepted or challenged.

Free up resources with automated processes to verify signatures during first envelope review

To help reduce the manual work involved in signature review, consider using automated signature verification tools. Software scans signatures on ballot envelopes and digitally compares them to voters' signatures on file, reporting whether they match and the confidence of a match. The results still require some manual review, particularly for signatures flagged by the software. Researchers are seeking ways to strengthen the reliability of automated technologies.

Signature reviews

To ensure ballots are accepted and rejected appropriately, state law requires counties to train employees to review ballot signatures. Leading practices recommend:

- **Using your most experienced staff to review signatures on questionable ballots**
- **Reviewing signatures more than once before officially challenging ballots and sending cure letters**

Consider reducing reliance on signatures using other methods of voter identification

Having more information available to confirm a voter's identity could help reduce rejection rates, especially when signatures are insufficient for identity verification.

During voter registration or update processes, collect a unique identification number already connected to a voter, such as a driver's license number, identification card number, or partial Social Security number. Voters then provide that number when they vote, and election officials confirm the information during the ballot review process.

Explore multifactor authentication (MFA) technology, which is increasingly common in online banking. In the setting of elections, the election system sends the voter a unique code using a trusted contact method – email or text message, for example – which the voter then includes when submitting the ballot.

Use digital technology to allow voters to cure challenged ballots quickly and remotely

Some election offices already use digital technologies to engage voters in the cure process more easily and quickly. For example, digital document services use website portals to allow voters to securely access and sign cure forms online. Similarly, curing through mobile technology gives voters the opportunity to review and submit necessary information through their phones or other mobile devices.

Curing ballots: Timing matters

To cure ballots, state law requires counties to mail cure letters and then to call any remaining voters with outstanding challenged ballots three days before election certification.

- **Contact challenged voters within a day of their ballot challenge**

Curing ballots: Multiple and varied efforts to reach the voter

In addition to contacting voters right away, taking additional steps to contact voters with challenged ballots can help ensure more cured ballots.

- **Make multiple attempts to contact voters using more immediate contact methods, such as emails or texts**

Curing ballots: Painless postage

Make it free and easy for voters to return a cure letter:

- **Send cure letters with prepaid postage on return envelopes**

Curing ballots: Language

Federal law requires jurisdictions that meet minimum minority-language thresholds to provide voting materials in different languages. Leading practices recommend doing so even if counties do not meet the minimum minority-language threshold.

- **Provide cure letters in voters' preferred languages**

Curing ballots: Retain signatures obtained during the curing process

- **If possible, collect several examples of a voter's signature during the curing process and on signature update forms.** You might do this by incorporating multiple places for voters to sign.

Phase 3 – After an election
- Updating voter identification contact information
- Updating voter signatures
- Using data to improve processes

Collect and update voter contact details in their registration records

Documenting voters' email addresses and telephone numbers from ballot return envelopes helps ensure you have the most up-to-date way to reach them if problems arise.

- **Request updated email addresses, in addition to telephone numbers**

- **Update email addresses and telephone numbers from information collected from all ballot envelopes, not just from challenged ballots**

Send signature update forms to all voters who meet certain criteria

After an election, notify voters if their ballot was not counted and explain why to help prevent problems during the next election. Leading practices suggest sending signature update forms to voters:

- **With mismatched signatures who did not respond to the cure letter**

- **Whose signatures were accepted but appear to be changing**

- **Who have recently changed their names**

Use data to implement and track the success of new practices, particularly those pertaining to ballot rejection rates

- **Use data to identify issues that might cause higher rejection rates and address the issues accordingly through targeted outreach or new practices.** For example, data might show a high number of unsigned ballots. You might respond by adding "Don't forget to sign" on return envelopes in future elections**.**

- **Use data to improve outreach efforts to groups of voters with higher-than-average rejection rates.** For example, if data shows younger voters have higher-than-average rejection rates, you might respond by targeting outreach to younger voters through social media.

- **Use data to monitor and track the success of new practices after putting them in place, then analyze how successfully the practices achieved their intended purpose.**