

October 11, 2022

ALL EMPLOYEES

SUBJECT: 2022 Guidance on Postmarking Ballots

With the 2022 General Election fast approaching, the intent of this memorandum is to review the Postal Service's longstanding postmarking policy for ballots returned through the mail and provide you with resources to reinforce proper ballot postmarking procedures with your employees. It is vital that we adhere to our core processes as we handle an increased number of ballots this year.

Of particular importance is ensuring that all return ballots are postmarked properly. In recognition of the importance that the election laws in some states place on postmarks for ballots mailed by voters, the Postal Service's long-standing policy has been to try to ensure that every return ballot mailed by voters receives a postmark. This policy applies regardless of the postage payment method or indicia on the mail pieces. Accordingly, our policy is to postmark any return ballots that are stamped, metered, permitted, Business Reply Mail, Qualified Business Reply Mail, Courtesy Reply Mail, or that contain any other method of paying postage (including Postage Validation Imprinter (PVI) or Self-Service Kiosk (SSK) labels). Even short paid ballots and ballots without postage must be postmarked (postage collection will happen later).

We recognize that this policy of postmarking all return ballots deviates from our normal procedures. Specifically, in the normal course of operations, the Postal Service does not postmark, or "cancel," every piece of mail in the system, since the primary purpose of cancellation is to ensure that postage cannot be reused, and some categories of postage are pre-cancelled before they enter the mailstream. However, our goal continues to be for every identifiable return ballot to have a postmark applied during Retail Operations or originating Processing Operations. There are a number of operational efforts in place to support this policy, including, but not limited to, deployment of ballot monitors; instructions regarding hand-cancellations of ballots at Retail and in Processing (when not postmarked in automation); and early cancellations in Processing during the week before Election Day.

While we strive to postmark every identifiable return ballot, we also must preserve the integrity and accuracy of the postmark date. The postmark contains the Postal Service's official representation of the date on which the Postal Service accepted custody of the mailpiece. As such, postmarks may be applied only at Retail (upon acceptance) or in the originating operation.

We understand that circumstances can arise that prevent ballots from receiving a legible postmark in the originating operation (e.g., ink smears on a machine, the mailpiece is stuck to another when it runs through the canceller machine, a ballot is included in a tray of metered return mail from a business that bypasses the cancellation machine as part of normal processing procedures, or an employee does not recognize the mailpiece as a ballot). In the rare instances when ballots go through the originating operation without receiving a postmark or a legible postmark, downstream operations (destinating processing operations, Delivery Units) **must not** apply a postmark or alter the envelope in any way because there is no way to reliably determine the date of acceptance. Applying a postmark with an inaccurate date undermines the integrity of the postmark and the credibility of the Postal Service.

For additional guidance, please see Election Mail SWIs, SUTs, Election Mail and Political Mail Processing Operations Management Order, and corresponding Service Talks. These documents can be found on Blue here: <https://blue.usps.gov/marketing/product-solutions/electionmail/welcome.htm>. Below is a more detailed discussion regarding proper postmarking practices for Processing, Retail, and Delivery.

### **Processing Operations**

All completed ballots returned through the mail should be postmarked/cancelled on our Advanced Facer Canceller Systems (AFCS/AFCS 200), Automated Flat Sorting Machine (AFSM100), or hand cancelled. Automated and manual postmarking operations should be spot-checked daily for correctness and legibility. If the date is not correct or readable, cancellation must stop immediately until the issue is resolved. Work with Maintenance to address any problems. If the issue is unable to be resolved prior to dispatch, hand cancellation must be used as a contingency.

Each originating plant should keep a supply of manual date stamps to hand-cancel any return ballots that do not receive a postmark (or a legible postmark) during automated processing operations. The stamp should be updated to the current date each day at the designated rollover time (06:59), and not before. The quality of the postmark should be checked to ensure the date is legible. If a ballot already has a postmark, do not apply a second.

Every effort should be made to postmark any uncanceled ballots in the originating operation, including by hand-cancellation. If any unpostmarked ballots are found in the destinating operation after such ballots have gone through the originating operation, a postmark should not be applied to those ballots. This is because the postmark is the Postal Service's official statement of the date on which it accepted custody of a mailpiece, and a destinating operation cannot reliably make that determination after the mailpiece has gone through the originating operation.

### **Retail and Delivery Operations**

If customers ask to have their ballots postmarked at the Retail Unit, Retail Unit Employees **must** hand-cancel the ballots upon accepting custody. Ballots also may be manually postmarked when "local turnaround" procedures are in effect. But the vast majority of ballots are not postmarked at retail, and are cancelled by processing operations. Many of our efforts related to postmarking will be implemented by processing operations. Retail employees can support these efforts by not trying ballots; all return ballots should be tendered loose in collection mail to mail-processing facilities.



Despite our best efforts, there will be some return ballots that reach a Delivery Unit without a postmark. In the rare instances where a ballot arrives at a Delivery Unit after going through processing and does not have a postmark or a legible postmark, Delivery Unit employees must NOT postmark the ballot envelope. This is because the postmark contains the Postal Service's official representation of the date on which the Postal Service accepted custody of the mailpiece, and there is no way for Delivery Units to make that determination at such a late stage in the process. Applying a postmark with an inaccurate date undermines the integrity of the postmark and the credibility of the Postal Service.

To briefly summarize:

- If you are in Retail, hand cancel ballots upon taking possession of the mailpiece if requested by the customer. Do not tray ballots; all return ballots should be tendered loose in collection mail to mail-processing facilities.
- If you are in Delivery, **do not** postmark ballots that have gone through processing operations.
- If executing a local turnaround under the 2022 Extraordinary Measures, ballots should be postmarked after collection and prior to being delivered to the appropriate BOE.

Thank you for your attention to this vital task.



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