



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth
Elections Division

Election Advisory #22-03

Accessible Voting by Mail for Qualifying Persons

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The VOTES Act provides for an Accessible Vote by Mail (AVBM) system that allows voters unable to mark a paper ballot because of a disability to receive, complete, and return their ballot electronically using a secure web portal. Voters may also choose to print their completed ballot and return it by mail, using a secure drop-box, or delivering it in person to their local election office or an early voting location in their municipality during early voting hours. The AVBM program applies to voters voting early by mail or by absentee ballot.

The AVBM system is available only to voters who are blind or have vision impairments, mobility/dexterity disabilities, or other disabilities that make it difficult or impossible for them to effectively access a paper vote by mail ballot because they cannot independently read, write, hold, or physically manipulate standard print materials. Voters who are eligible and wish to use the system will apply to their local election officials. We've contracted with a vendor, Democracy Live, to provide the AVBM system called OmniBallot, which will be available for all elections, including local elections, at no cost to municipalities. This system will also be used for UOCAVA voters for future elections. Further guidance on use by UOCAVA voters will be forthcoming.

OVERVIEW OF AVBM

Voters must first submit a completed Vote by Mail application to request an accessible vote by mail ballot. Primarily, voters will use the AVBM application or the online mail-in ballot request portal. Once a request is received, you will verify the voter is eligible to receive a ballot for the specified election(s) and add them as an EV in VRIS.

You must then provide the voter's information to the Accessible Vote by Mail Coordinator ("Coordinator"). You will then send the voter two emails, one that includes the link to the AVBM system and instructions for completing and returning their ballot and another with the PIN required to access the AVBM system.

After completing their ballot, the voter can return it electronically or by printing it. If returned electronically, it is returned through the Democracy Live OmniBallot portal and can be downloaded and printed. If the voter chooses to print and return their ballot, they must notify you of their return choice by the vote by mail application deadline, as you will need to send them the required materials to return their ballot by mail, drop-box, or in person.

Ballots received by close of polls will be counted in your office after polls close. For November biennial state elections, AVBM ballots received by mail after close of polls but by 5pm on the third day after the election will be hand-counted when counting other mail-in ballots received after Election Day.

PROCESS FOR REQUESTING ACCOMMODATIONS

To access the AVBM system, the voter must first submit a completed vote by mail application to you. Applications must be received by the deadline to request a vote by mail ballot for the requested election. The Elections Division recommends voters use the accessible vote by mail application on the Secretary's website to request their ballot or to use the online mail-in ballot request portal.

Accessible Vote by Mail Application

An accessible vote by mail application can be found on the Secretary's website and on the L drive. When providing it to a voter, it should remain in the same format so it remains accessible. The voter will need to complete the following information on their application before submitting it to you:

1. Voter information:
 - a. Full Name (First, Middle, Last)
 - b. Voter Registration Address (street address, city/town, zip code)
 - c. Date of Birth
 - d. Email Address (required)
2. Ballot information:
 - a. Election(s) for which they wish to receive a ballot electronically
 - b. Party (if requesting a primary ballot and voter is not registered in a political party)
 - c. Ballot Mailing Address (if different from the Voter Registration Address and if the voter wants to return their ballot by mail, drop-box, or in person)
3. Accommodations
 - a. Voter must select at least one option in the Accommodations section

Unlike other applications, the voter **MUST** include an email address on their application to access the AVBM system. The email address will be used to provide the voter with access to AVBM portal.

The voter must also include a signature on their application, which may be handwritten or hand-drawn using a mouse or stylus. The voter may also attach an image of their handwritten signature in lieu of one on the application. A typed signature is only acceptable if the voter checked the accommodation that they are unable to insert a handwritten or hand-drawn signature due to a disability.

Applications must be received by the deadline to submit vote by mail applications for the specified election.

Online Mail-In Ballot Request Portal

Voters may also request an AVBM ballot using the SOC's online mail-in ballot portal. The voter must provide the required information to request a ballot using the portal. Voters requesting an AVBM ballot must also provide an email address on their application and must indicate they are requesting the use of the AVBM system as an accommodation due to a disability preventing them from marking a paper ballot.

After the voter submits the application, their information will be sent to VRIS and will be in EV: EV App. The report in this window includes whether a voter requested an accessible ballot.

Adding Voter to VRIS

After receiving the application, you must enter the voter in VRIS as an EV for the specified election(s) through EV: EV Search. You should include all fields provided on the application. We recommend entering the email address in the voter's EV record for later use.

If the voter is not a registered voter in your municipality or you reject the application for any reason, you should notify the voter that their application has been rejected.

UPLOADING TO AVBM SYSTEM

After the voter is entered in VRIS, they must be added to the AVBM system, which will be done by the AVBM Coordinator. You will first complete the "AVBM Voter Information" spreadsheet, which can be found on your L drive. Each voter who requested an accessible ballot should have the following information on the spreadsheet:

1. Voter's voter ID
2. Voter's Ward (if applicable, otherwise leave blank)
3. Voter's Precinct
4. Voter's First Name
5. Voter's Middle Name or Initial (if applicable)
6. Voter's Last Name
7. Voter's Date of Birth
8. Voter's Residential Address
9. City/Town
10. Voter's Party Ballot Choice (for primaries only. If the voter is registered in a party, enter the voter's party in this field.) Please enter the party ballot choice as Dem or Rep

11. Unique 7 digit PIN for voter to use to access ballot

After entering the voter's information, save the spreadsheet to your desktop or a different location on your PC. We recommend that you name the file with your city/town name, AVBM, and the date as follows: City/Town name_AVBM_date. Send the spreadsheet with the voter information to the AVBM Coordinator to upload to the AVBM portal. An email with the voter information attached should be sent to the Coordinator at avbm@sec.state.ma.us. You should send the file the same day you create the spreadsheet. The Coordinator will notify you by email once the voter(s) have been added.

PROVIDING THE BALLOT TO THE VOTER

Once the Coordinator informs you the voter has been added to the AVBM system, you will need to send two emails to the voter. The first will provide the voter with the link to access their electronic ballot, as well as instructions for completing and returning their ballot electronically or by mail, drop-box, or in person. The second email will include the voter's PIN that you created that allows the voter to access the AVBM system.

Templates for these communications may also be found on your L drive. For the September 6, 2022 state primary, the welcome email is titled "State Primary Welcome Template FINAL" and the access PIN email is titled "Access PIN Template FINAL". Please remember to replace the red text in the welcome email with your office's phone number and email address and add your signature.

Voters can return their completed, marked ballot electronically or by mail, secure drop-box, or in person to your local election office or early voting location during early voting hours.

RETURNING THE BALLOT ELECTRONICALLY

When you send the Coordinator the information for your first voter, you should also include contact information for the user in your office that you would like to have access to view, download, and print materials returned by the voter. Please include the user's name, email address, and phone number. The Coordinator will then have an account created by the vendor (Democracy Live) for you to access the OmniBallot Administrative website.

After an account has been created, the Coordinator will provide you with the account information and will copy the Democracy Live contact. The Democracy Live contact will then coordinate with the user to provide a short Zoom training on how to view, download, and print the returned materials (ballot and affidavit).

Once you have printed the ballot and affidavit, place the marked ballot in an envelope, seal it, and attach the affidavit to the sealed envelope. You must then update the voter's EV record with whether the ballot was accepted or rejected. You will then securely store the envelope and affidavit until ready for counting. The deadline to return electronic vote by mail ballots is 8pm on Election Day.

You must access the OmniBallot Administrative website through your city/town PC, as your state computer does not connect to the internet, which is required for the portal.

PRINTING AND RETURNING A BALLOT

If a voter would like to return their ballot by mail, secure drop-box, or in-person at your office or an early voting location during early voting hours, they MUST notify you so you can mail them a secrecy envelope and return mailing envelope. Requests for materials to return a printed ballot must be received by the deadline to apply for a vote by mail ballot (5pm on the 5th business day before the election).

If a voter requests materials to return a printed ballot, you must prepare and send the required EV7 and AV8 ballot return envelopes. You should use loose envelopes as opposed to kitted ballots, since the voter does not need to be sent a ballot or instructions.

Preparing the EV7

Since the EV7 requires a voter's signature, you must prepare it to accommodate a visually impaired voter by marking the signature line on the front of the envelope with a hole punch and affixing an EV label.

Punch the hole directly the right of the numeral "1" and directly above the "Voter's signature" on the left-hand side of the EV7. Place the EV7 label printed from VRIS directly beneath the signature line. You will want to affix the label as neatly as possible parallel to the signature line. The hole and label are used as tactile guides for the voter to sign the envelope, so envelopes should be prepared exactly as in the below example, to the extent possible.

EV7

Commonwealth of Massachusetts
EARLY BALLOT ENVELOPE

Under the penalties of perjury, I swear (or affirm) that I am a registered voter in Massachusetts at the address below, that I will not cast a ballot in any other city or town or voting location, and that the information below is true.

VOTER SIGN HERE

1.  _____

2. Voter's Full Name _____

3. Voter's Residential Address _____

3. _____

ASSISTING PERSON

Mailing the Envelopes

After preparing the EV7, place it inside an AV11 envelope along with a preaddressed, postage prepaid AV8. You should not place the EV7 inside the AV8 but rather should mail both envelopes loose inside the AV11. Seal the AV11 and mail it to the voter's mailing address (if one was provided) or residential address (if no mailing address exists). **Do not include a ballot or instructions inside the AV11.**

Ballots Printed and Returned

Once the voter has the required materials, they may return their ballot through the mail, using a secure drop-box, or in person to your office or an early voting location during early voting hours. Voters who have not requested or received the required envelopes cannot print and return their ballot and must return it electronically through the portal.

Once they complete marking their ballot, the voter will print their marked ballot on paper. They will then fold and seal their printed ballot in the EV7 you provided and seal the EV7. The voter will then complete the affidavit on the EV7 using the hole punch as a guide. Voters may also choose to complete and print the Electronic Affidavit of Compliance. Signatures may be hand-drawn using a mouse or stylus. Voters may also type their signature if they affirm they cannot independently insert a hand-drawn signature.

The voter must then place the signed EV7, or the unsigned EV7 and accompanying affidavit (outside the EV7), inside the AV8 and return the AV8 to you by mail, drop-box, or in person. If the voter is using the Electronic Affidavit of Compliance, they must return it outside of the EV7. A family member can also hand-deliver the voter's ballot back to you.

Receiving Printed Ballots

The deadlines for receiving any vote by mail ballots applies to AVBM ballots as well. After receiving a printed ballot, you will open the AV8, remove the EV7 and timestamp the inner envelope. The hole punch in the EV7 will indicate that the ballot is an AVBM ballot. Verify the voter signed either the EV7 or the included affidavit. A typed signature is acceptable if accompanied by a statement that the voter is unable to independently insert a hand-drawn signature. If there is no signature on the EV7 and no included affidavit, the ballot must be rejected and the voter should be notified.

Update the status of the ballot (whether accepted or rejected) in VRIS in the voter's EV record, then place the envelope in a secure location until ready for counting.

COUNTING AVBM BALLOTS

The deadline to receive an AVBM ballot is the same as for any vote by mail ballot returned by the same method. Ballots returned electronically, by drop-box, or in person must be received by 8pm on Election Day. Ballots returned by mail must be received by 8pm on Election Day for all elections except November biennial state elections. For a November biennial state election, ballots returned by mail must be postmarked by Election Day. For 2022, ballots mailed within the US must be postmarked on or before November 8th and received by 5pm on Saturday, November 12th. to be eligible to be counted. Ballots mailed from outside the US must be postmarked on or before November 8th and received by 5pm on November 18th to be eligible to be counted.

After the close of polls, you must open and hand-count any AVBM ballots in the same manner as UOCAVA ballots received electronically. AVBM ballots cannot be sent to the polling place to be counted or be included in any Advance Removal or Advance Deposit sessions. For a November biennial state elections, ballots received after Election Day will be hand counted when counting other mail-in ballots received after Election Day.

EMERGENCY ABSENTEE BALLOTS

Voters who are unable to mark a paper ballot because of a disability and are admitted to a healthcare facility after noon on the seventh day before any election may also use the AVBM system to vote absentee. We will be creating a special application for this process that the voter must complete and send to you. You'll need to then contact the Coordinator at avbm@sec.state.ma.us to provide the voter with access to a ballot, as well as any return materials if required.

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN 2022

If you have other elections in 2022, whether on the same day as the state primary and state election or on a separate date, please provide the election information when sending the voter's information to the Coordinator. If you anticipate having voters in your municipality request an accessible vote by mail ballot for the local election, please contact the Coordinator as soon as possible.

Questions?

Contact the Accessible Vote by Mail Coordinator at 617-727-2828 or avbm@sec.state.ma.us.