

September 26, 2024

ALL EMPLOYEES

SUBJECT: 2024 Guidance on Postmarking Ballots

As the 2024 General Election approaches on November 5, this memorandum serves to review and reinforce the Postal Service's longstanding postmarking policy for ballots returned by mail. Upon receipt of this memorandum, please take time to fully explain the importance of our postmarking policy to your direct reports. A copy of this memorandum will be posted on the Postal Service Intranet at blue.usps.gov and usps.com/electionmail.

Key Point: Proper Postmarking of Return Ballots

It is essential that all return ballots are correctly postmarked. Many states use postmarks as proof that a ballot was timely mailed, and our longstanding policy has been to try to ensure that every return ballot that is mailed by voters receives a postmark. This policy applies regardless of the postage payment method or indicia on the mailpieces. 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).

Normally, as you know, we do not postmark or "cancel" every piece of mail in our typical operations, as the primary goal of cancellation is to prevent postage reuse. However, for the election, we must ensure to the best of our ability that every identifiable return ballot receives a postmark during Retail Operations or originating Processing Operations. We have specific operational initiatives to support this goal, such as deploying ballot monitors and ambassadors, instructing hand-cancellations at Retail and in Processing, and early cancellations in the week before Election Day.

Maintaining Postmark Integrity

While we make our best efforts to postmark all return ballots, it's vital to preserve the integrity and accuracy of the postmark date. The postmark represents the official date on which the Postal Service accepted custody of the ballot. Postmarks may be applied only at the point of Retail acceptance, within originating processing operations, or as part of "local turnaround" or "hub and spoke" procedures when they are in effect.

We understand that certain situations may arise that prevent ballots from receiving a clear postmark during the initial processing stage. This could occur due to factors like ink smears on machines, mailpieces getting stuck in the machine, or ballots being included in trays of metered return mail that bypass normal cancellation processes. It may also happen if an employee fails to recognize a mailpiece as a ballot. In cases where ballots go through the originating operation without receiving a postmark, downstream operations (such as processing centers or delivery units) **may not** apply a postmark or alter the envelope in any way. This is because it is impossible to reliably determine the date of acceptance once the

mailpiece is in one of these downstream operations, and applying a postmark with an incorrect date undermines the integrity of the postmark and the credibility of the Postal Service.

For additional guidance, please see Election Mail Standard Work Instructions (SWIs), Standup Talks (SUTs), Election Mail and Political Mail Processing Operations Management Order (POMO), 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 Canceler 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 processing must stop immediately until the issue is resolved. Maintenance should be contacted to address any problems. If the issue cannot be resolved before dispatch, hand cancellation must be used as a contingency.

Each originating plant should keep a supply of round date hand cancellers on hand 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 legible postmark, do not apply a second postmark.

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 **may 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 request that their ballots be postmarked at the Retail Unit, Retail Unit Employees **must** hand-cancel the ballots upon accepting custody. Retail Unit Employees **may not** postmark a ballot if the customer wants the ballot back and is not entering it into the mailstream.

Ballots should be manually postmarked when "local turnaround" or "hub and spoke" procedures are in effect. When postmarking ballots for local turnaround or hub and spoke, make sure to follow all steps outlined in the Standard Work Instruction (SWI) issued by the CRDO.

The vast majority of ballots are cancelled by processing operations. Retail employees can support that effort by not traying ballots; all return ballots that are sent to processing (and that

are not part of a “local turnaround” or “hub and spoke”) 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 **may 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.
- All return ballots that are sent to processing (and that are not part of a “local turnaround” or “hub and spoke”) should be tendered loose in collection mail to mail-processing facilities.
- If executing a local turnaround or hub and spoke operation under the 2024 Extraordinary Measures, ballots should be postmarked upon collection and prior to being delivered to the appropriate BOE.
- If you are in Delivery, **do not** postmark ballots that have gone through processing operations and that have arrived at the Delivery Unit without a postmark.

Thank you for your attention to this vital task.

Dr. Joshua D. Colin
Chief Retail & Delivery Officer
and Executive V.P.

Isaac Cronkhite
Chief Processing &
Distribution Officer and
Executive V.P.

Ron Jarriel
Chief Logistics & Infrastructure
Officer and
Executive V.P.