



Commonwealth of Virginia  
**Fairfax County**

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## **Absentee Ballot**

# **Pre-processing Phase I Ballot Extraction Operation Manual**

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Issued by the  
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## Fairfax County Office of Elections Contact Information

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- **Registrar/Elections Information:**  
Phone: 703-222-0776  
Email: [voting@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:voting@fairfaxcounty.gov)  
[www.fairfaxcounty.gov/elections](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/elections)
- **Absentee Voting Information:**  
Phone: 703-324-4969  
Email: [absenteevoting@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:absenteevoting@fairfaxcounty.gov)  
[www.fairfaxcounty.gov/elections/absentee-voting-mail](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/elections/absentee-voting-mail)
- **Central Absentee Precinct (CAP) Staff:**  
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Email: [CAPStaff@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:CAPStaff@fairfaxcounty.gov)

## Background – Office of Elections/Absentee Ballot Division

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The Fairfax County Office of Elections is committed to providing each citizen of Fairfax County with the opportunity to exercise their right to vote in an efficient and equitable manner. This effort is accomplished in accordance with the Constitutions of the United States and the Commonwealth of Virginia, as well as the Code of Virginia.

It is the responsibility of the Office of Elections to ensure each election is run fairly and openly. Virginia state law requires all Election Office employees to execute their duties to the best of their abilities and that they studiously endeavor to prevent fraud, deceit, and abuse when conducting elections.

The Absentee Ballot division within the Office of Elections, is responsible for executing and managing those actions required to mail out, receive, and account for absentee ballots sent to registered voters in Fairfax County. Absentee ballots are sent only to voters who have requested, in writing, to vote absentee.

There are several processes involved to accurately and efficiently; receive, sort, count, and record receipt of the voter's ballot into the statewide voter database.

**This manual details the actions necessary to open and extract absentee ballots returned to the Office of Elections (Pre-processing, Phase 1).**

## Absentee Ballot Process Overview

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If a voter wishes to vote absentee, their first step is to submit, in writing, an absentee ballot application to the Fairfax County Office of Elections. The application must be mailed, emailed, or submitted through the Department of Elections online portal. An absentee ballot cannot be requested via telephone. When the voter's request is approved, an absentee ballot is sent to the requester within three business days once ballots have been printed. After the voter

receives and votes their ballot, they return it to the Office of Elections inside a sealed return mailer by the various methods listed below:

1. United States Postal Service (USPS)
2. Commercial mail delivery system (FedEx, DHL, UPS, etc.)
3. Placed in a drop box at early voting locations during operating hours
4. In the 24/7 drop box located outside at the Fairfax County Government Center
5. On election day, placed in a drop box at a polling place
6. Hand delivered to the Fairfax County Office of Elections, suite 323

When the return mailer is received in the office, it is sorted by category (domestic/UOCAVA digital, UOCAVA email, drop box), stamped with the date it was received in the office, counted by category, and placed in designated mail trays. Each tray of sorted return mailers creates a “bundle” which is organized and tracked by the date the mailer is received in the Office of Elections. Once categorized and trayed, the return mailers are ready for the check-in operation.

During the return mailer check-in operation, the voter’s ballot status, as reflected in VERIS, the statewide voter database system, transitions from “issued” (absentee ballot sent to voter), to “pre-processed” (absentee ballot returned, Statement of Absentee Voter completed with required signatures). Once the Mail Check-in process has been completed, the return mailers cycle forward to Extraction team leads who ready them for Pre-Processing, Phase 1, Opening and Extraction.

The first step in preparing the return mailers for Phase 1 is to create “batches”. Batching is the process of combining trays of same category (domestic/UOCAVA digital, dropbox, UOCAVA email), bundled returned mailers into larger sets of mailers ranging up to 800 in number. Once batched, the return mailers are placed in yellow mail trays which indicates they are ready for the opening of each return mailer and removal of its enclosed ballot (Pre-Processing Phase 1). Pre-processing Phase II is the scanning of the returned absentee ballots using the DS 850.

All return mailers are kept in secure storage throughout each phase of absentee ballot processing (receipt, check-in, opening/extraction, scanning).

## **Pre-processing Phase 1 – Opening and Extraction**

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This first phase of pre-processing is a two-step function. Step one is the physical opening of each return mailer with step two being removal of its enclosed folded ballot.

### **Step One - opening return mailers:**

1. At the start of each workday, two Elections Office staff transport trays of batched return mailers from secure storage to the workroom.
2. The staff members use the automated envelope opener machine to open each return mailers. Care is taken to ensure the enclosed ballot is not damaged.

3. Only return mailers that can be processed (ballot removed/extracted) by the end of the workday are opened.
4. After opening, the trays of now opened return mailers are placed in storage racks, awaiting step two, ballot extraction.

## **Step Two - extracting ballots from return mailers:**

1. Each extraction team consists of two to four people. Each team has a designated team leader. The table team leader is responsible for the proper execution of the team's duties which include:
  - a. proper removal of the folded ballot from its return mailer
  - b. maintaining security and secrecy of each ballot
  - c. ensuring accurate counts of ballots and return mailers
  - d. coordinating resolution of potential issues with Extraction Operation Supervisor
  - e. accurately completing the Ballot Batch Tracking Log
2. When ready, the Extraction Operation Supervisor brings one batch of opened return mailers to each table for processing. A batch averages 1-2 trays and contains approximately 700-800 return mailers with ballots enclosed.
3. From the batch trays, each team member takes a handful of mailers and puts them in front of their seat. Taking one mailer at a time, the folded ballot is removed from its return mailer and placed into the plastic box in front of their seat marked "ballots" and the empty return mailer placed in the plastic box marked "empty mailers". All extraction work is conducted on the tabletop. Return mailers and ballots must always be visible.
4. Team members place any visibly damaged ballots (torn/missing corners, damaged timing marks, etc.) into the tray designated for non-scannable/damaged ballots. Still place its associated mailer into the plastic box for empty return mailers. Ballots that cannot be digitally read by the DS850 will be hand-counted.
5. Periodically, a team member finds a return mailer in which the contents are not as they should be such as no ballot/empty mailer, two or more ballots in one mailer, only contains election information materials but no ballot, etc. This is known as a "faulty mailer". When this occurs, the team leader notifies the Extraction Operation Supervisor who removes it from the batch and directs the team leader to adjust the batch count. The Operation Supervisor then forwards the faulty mailer to the Curing team for processing.
6. When the batch trays on the table are empty, each team member counts their stacks of folded ballots and empty return mailers. Ballots and empty mailers are counted separately, in groups of ten, crisscrossing each group of ten to create stacks of 50. During the counting, ballots are kept folded. The first count of mailers and ballots is then verified by a second person at the table. Team members physically switch to another seat at the table and count the stacks of ballots and return mailers in front of that seat. The first person's count must match the second person's count. If the counts

do not match, the stacks are recounted until they do match. **Counts must match before moving forward!**

7. Once counts of the ballots and empty return mailers match, the table team leader completes the ballot batch tracking log.
8. After counts match the next step is for each team member to unfold their ballots (maintaining the stacks of 50 ballots). The unfolded ballots are placed on the table with the front of the ballot (side showing the office races) facing down and oriented in the same direction. **Note:** the folded ballot may have a paper tab across the top of the page. This is a left over from the printing process. When unfolding the ballot, check for any paper tabs and remove them. If the tab is left on the ballot, it could damage the DS 850 scanner.
9. With the ballots unfolded, flattened, and faced in the same direction, it's time to put the ballot stacks into the batch box at the table. When putting the ballots into the batch box, insert a colored piece of paper in between each stack. This separation between stacks helps the scan team.
10. Once all scannable (undamaged) ballots have been put in the batch box, the table team leader places the completed ballot batch tracking log on top of them. Finally, the non-scannable (damaged) ballots are placed on top of the log. With all materials now in the batch box, the order should be:
  - a. scannable ballots (bottom – face down)
  - b. completed ballot batch tracking log (center)
  - c. non-scannable/damaged ballots (top – face down)
11. Now that the unfolded ballots are boxed, the next step is to take the stacks of 50 mailers created during the counting process, rubber band them, and place the bundles back into the yellow trays.
12. When all table actions have been completed (return mailers in yellow trays, unfolded ballots, and log in the batch box), the table team leader notifies the Extraction Operation Supervisor that the batch is ready for review by the Quality Assurance (QA) team.
13. The QA team is made up of two Elections Office staff. The team takes the trays of bundled return mailers and boxed unfolded ballots to their work area. The QA team will:
  - a. place bundled return mailers in to a #5 box (contains only empty return mailers).
  - b. remove a batch number label from one of the yellow mail trays and place it on the side of the #5 box.
  - c. verify all paper tabs are removed from the unfolded ballots, that the ballots are faced down and properly nested, and that the tracking log is completed.
  - d. remove the batch number label from the second yellow tray and place it on the side of the batch box.
  - e. place two blue pre-numbered batch labels inside the batch box. These labels are used by the scan team.
  - f. seal the batch box with black security tape.

- g. sign/initial the security tape.

The sealed batch box is now ready for Pre-processing, Phase II – Scanning and is transported to a secure location for overnight storage.

### **E-mail ballot extraction from return mailers:**

Email ballots are received from overseas voters in variously sized return mailers. Due to this fact, these mailers must be opened manually using a letter opener. They are separated and accounted for in the same manner as domestic/UOCAVA digital return mailers with some exceptions:

1. Once the email ballot is removed from its return mailer, the ballot is unfolded and placed face down (office races facing down) in a security case and stored until they are transferred to the hand-count tally team post-election day.
2. The empty mailer is placed in a #5 box that is marked with the date range of the mailers contained inside.