

Testimony of Amber McReynolds, CEO of the National Vote at Home Institute, Election Administration Expert, Author, and Former Denver, Colorado Elections Director.

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Chairman, Members, & Staff,

Thank you for inviting me to provide testimony about the resiliency and readiness of our election systems during this unprecedented public health crisis.

The pandemic has upended all aspects of our lives and the voting process is no different. Simply put, our democracy is essential and we must do everything we can to ensure our election system is ready, resilient, and secure. Let me be clear: Election officials are working each and every day to make this happen, even in extremely challenging circumstances and often with one hand tied behind their backs due to outdated laws and a lack of funding and resources. Extraordinarily long lines or other challenging circumstances that voters often face are usually the most visible symptoms of a policy or a resource issue. Election officials have responded to difficult circumstances with little support and will attempt to do so again this year. But this year is unprecedented. They need support from elected leaders that have power to help. They are on the front lines, delivering democracy to all voters in small towns and in metro areas, and it is only right that policymakers respond to their needs. Extraordinary challenges call for extraordinary solutions.

What is clear to me during this pandemic and other challenges we have faced as a nation is that Americans are resilient, and we need a voting process that is proven – resilient from a pandemic, from unfairness, from barriers, from foreign adversaries, from administrative deficiencies and from outdated policies that create challenges. We need a system that can withstand all.

The fact is the pandemic has exposed challenges in most states' historical reliances on in-person voting on one single day that require a large number of people and resources to manage. In too many primary states this year, the closure of polling places, poll worker shortages, long lines, insufficient training, and voters' reluctance to enter crowded environments threaten the ability to vote in-person, and surges in absentee ballot requests that went unfulfilled left many voters unable to safely exercise their fundamental right to vote. It is our elected leaders' responsibility to ensure our democracy functions and all voters have access to participate. Enabling voting at home options is one way to solve the challenges election officials and by extension, voters face during this pandemic. Voting by mail is proven, time-tested, and secure, and it dates back to the Civil War.

The mail ballot model puts voters first and has proven to be resilient during both natural disasters and the current pandemic. It is possible to improve the voting experience, streamline the administrative process, enhance security, all while conserving valuable resources, increasing turnout, and increasing trust in government. Voters have been voting this way at home safely and securely for decades in many states. From Utah, to Colorado, California, Oregon, Washington, DC, Vermont, and

now Nevada, policymakers have acted to ensure voters have a clear range of options to vote safely and securely. *No one should have to choose between voting and protecting their health.*

What does the process look like?

1. **In 8 states plus DC (CA, CO, DC, HI, NV, OR, UT, VT, and WA, all as of August 2020)** voters will be mailed a ballot in advance of the election and have multiple options to return their ballot at a secure drop box, voting location, or by mailing the ballot back through the postal service.

In the rest of the states, voters can request that a ballot be mailed to them. A small number of those states still require an excuse to be provided with the ballot request, and even fewer still limit options based on a voter's age.

Every state offers an option to vote from home. Whether you call it absentee, vote by mail, mail-in ballots - it means that a ballot is being sent to the voter by mail, the voter completes the ballot, and the ballot is returned.

2. **Voting at home is a safe and secure method of voting** and the process includes strong security measures that ensure the authenticity of ballots. In some states, the process includes tracking ballots from the day they are printed to the day they are processed. Just like tracking a package ordered online.
3. **Accurate voter information is key**, which requires that election officials have the latest address information for each voter. Most states share information on voter movement across state lines, others directly contact voters based on mail forwarding designations, death records, motor vehicle registrations, and more to make sure voter information is accurate.
4. **Your ballot is as unique as you are:** Every voter gets a ballot with barcodes on the envelope that correspond to the individual voter and the voter's address. The ballot itself has a removable stub, the information for the specific election, precinct style, and other variables depending on the state.
5. **Once ballots are dropped off, they go through a verification process:** During the process, election officials make sure that the voting record of each voter is marked and that the ballot envelope is verified before the ballot is counted, much like when a voter checks in at their polling location.
6. **The ballot is then extracted from the envelope.** The extraction process protects voter privacy, while maintaining the voter's identity in the barcoding process for security. Audits are conducted at each step and these audits ensure that every eligible vote received in the designated timeframe is counted.

7. **Then the ballots are sent to the counting room** and at this point, state of the art scanning equipment counts each batch of ballots. Voter intent issues on ballots (such as stray marks) are flagged for review and resolved by election officials.
8. **Signature verification is a best practice security measure when combined with appropriate processes:** Voters sign their ballot the same way they sign other legal documents, and that signature is verified against other official signatures on record. When done according to best practices like demographically blind review, signature verification is an important security measure that leads to greater election confidence. Also voters with signature issues are given the opportunity to “cure” their ballots, meaning that they are able to directly verify the authenticity of their ballot.

Notable considerations:

1. As noted in the [CISA Report](#) released on Friday, “Disinformation risk to mail-in voting infrastructure and processes is similar to that of in-person voting while utilizing different content. Threat actors may leverage limited understanding regarding mail-in voting to mislead and confuse the public.”
 - a. This includes casting doubt without evidence about the mail ballot process. Thus, combatting disinformation and misinformation is a critical aspect of election officials’ work. Expanding vote-at-home options is nonpartisan and supported by leaders on both sides of the aisle.
2. Changes to USPS processes and delivery timelines will have a significant impact on our election process, regardless of voting method. Mail ballots are just one piece of how the USPS supports election infrastructure. Federal and state laws have legal mandates with regards to sending voter registration information, ballot issue notices, election information, poll worker appointment letters, polling place notification cards, signature cards, address update notifications, and other required mailings. All of these **legally required** mailings are at risk if the post office is not able to process mail effectively or experiences delays.
3. Some states, such as MI, PA, WI, NY, MD, and AL, have not updated certain election laws and processes to ensure adequate time to process mail ballots, hence recent delays with election results. Local election officials have repeatedly highlighted this gap, and policymakers have not made these necessary adjustments even though they are simply operational, and not partisan. States still have time to close these holes, and support election officials.
4. As with every part of our election system, we must be able to detect, deter, and hold accountable any bad actor who tries to interfere with the election process or with an individual voter. While voter fraud is exceedingly rare in elections regardless of voting method, it is still critical for election officials to detect malicious activity and for voters to report suspicious activity to appropriate authorities.

Our democracy functions well when every eligible voter is able to exercise their right to vote.

Voters have already chosen to vote at home in record numbers in the primaries. Recent surveys show that an extraordinary number of voters are choosing to vote from home this November as well. Voters — the customers of our democracy — are sending a very clear message about how they want to vote; policymakers must respond to the needs of election officials to ensure they have the resources to serve voters effectively.

No election system is perfect, and this is why it is critical to continually review and improve systems by enhancing security, access, and transparency, particularly in this unprecedented time. An example of a necessary improvement is the implementation of ballot tracking systems that provide accountability to voters about the status of their ballot and give election officials an ability to track ballots through the process. Another example is advanced auditing techniques such as risk-limiting audits. We cannot settle when the moment calls for us to do better.

Democracy is the shared DNA of our nation, to our people, to our communities. We must do everything we can to ensure that it works for all, even in this most trying time. Going into November, election administration must be about who votes, not who wins. You all have the opportunity to create a path forward for the American people, and for an American democratic method that voters of all stripes can be confident in. Let's do that together.