



# Pulaski County Election Commission

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## 2020 General Election Absentee Voting Contingency Plan

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Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the effect it could have on poll workers, election officials, and voters, it is our duty as Election Commissioners to create a contingency plan to adequately prepare should a resurgence occur around the time of the 2020 General Election. If a resurgence occurs, absentee voting under the current law would likely increase. Additionally, public statements by Governor Asa Hutchinson and Secretary of State John Thurston on July 2, 2020 made clear that the COVID-19 Pandemic makes all Arkansas voters eligible to request an absentee ballot.

This plan has been prepared in anticipation of the worst-case scenario, meaning a continued spike of Covid-19 lasting into the fall, leading to increases in requests and delivery of absentee ballots that the Election Commission would be tasked with Canvassing. This plan is intended as an internal working document and, therefore, assumes existing knowledge of the process on behalf of the user. It is designed to be iterative and adapt to the changing public health and election landscape as well as requirements under the law.

1. **Historical Background for Reference** For 2012 and 2016, the Clerk's Office sent an average of 6,891 absentee ballots to Pulaski County voters.
2. For 2012 and 2016, an average of 4,698 absentee ballots were counted.
3. Based on the average number of absentee ballots sent and the average number of absentee ballots received, 10% were rejected and ultimately not counted.

### The Current Absentee Ballot Canvassing Process

1. Canvassing is conducted in the same building as election commission staff. This is critical for several reasons:
  - a. Canvassers frequently have questions that require staff and canvassers to review a single document simultaneously.
  - b. Chain of custody of voted absentee ballots require they always remain within an access-controlled environment.
  - c. When canvassers are not present, all canvassed and uncanvassed absentee ballots and their constituted parts must be kept secure under election commission staff control.

- d. Once absentee ballots are ready to be tabulated, they must be securely transported to the commission office where tabulation equipment is located.
  - e. Canvassing operations should also be proximal to the County Clerk's office. Once Canvassing begins, Commission staff make frequent trips to pick up voted absentee ballots processed by the Voter Registration Office.
  - f. Commission staff should remain in the commission office during the canvassing period to address the myriad other election related issues.
2. The current team of 23 absentee canvassers consist of:
    - a. One Chief Judge
    - b. One Assistant Chief Judge
    - c. One Runner
    - d. 20 Canvassers
  3. ***Absentee canvassers require specialized skills and traits to be effective.*** Experience has proven that selecting the right people for these positions is essential.
  4. ***Absentee canvassers can process approximately 40 ballots per two-person team per hour.*** Essentially, it takes approximately 1.5 minutes for a pair of absentee canvassers to process a single absentee ballot, on average.
  5. Additional time is required for the following processes involved in canvassing:
    - a. Preparation of the ballots for canvassing (counting, batching, etc.)
    - b. A secondary review by staff of Irregular Absentee Ballots (approximately 25%)
    - c. Ballot Only Envelopes must be opened, and ballots removed
    - d. Some Absentee Ballots must be remade.
  6. An estimated 400 absentee ballots could be potentially be processed per hour with 10 canvassing teams.
    - a. ***6,755 ballots (General Election average) would take approximately 17 hours to canvass.***
  7. Under the law, absentee canvassing may begin at 8:30 a.m. seven days prior to Election Day.
    - a. Due to the intense and detailed nature of the work, canvassers should not work more than 8 hours per day.
    - b. Canvassers normally work from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. weekdays and longer on Election Day.
    - c. This has allowed a total of 56 hours for the canvassing process.
  8. Under the current absentee canvassing process without any major ***issues an estimated 22,400 absentee ballots could potentially be processed in the seven days currently allowed by law***; however, this has never been tested. A more realistic estimate would be closer to 15,000 absentee ballots over a 7-day period.
  9. Absentee Ballots cannot be tabulated until 8:30 a.m. on Election Day.
    - a. Absentee Ballots have historically been tabulated on an M-650 high speed tabulation device.

## Absentee Canvassing Under a COVID-19 Resurgence

(Assumptions are based on the cumulative experience of commission staff and best practices. Any estimates used are approximations only. These assumptions have not been tested or vetted.)

***1. The Pulaski County Election Commission holds the health and safety of commission staff, election officials, poll workers, absentee canvassers, voters, and the public at large to the highest degree.***

***2. The procedures currently in place for canvassing absentee ballots work. No significant changes should be made to existing procedures and implemented for the first time in a Presidential Election. However, existing procedures can be modified to meet a potential increase in the total number of absentee ballots.***

3. Absentee ballot canvassing should continue to be conducted in the same building with election commission staff for the reasons listed above.

4. Planning should be conservative and prepare the Election Commission to address the worst-case scenario.

5. Estimated increase in the number of absentee ballots requested should a resurgence occur:

a. +25% = 8,444 (approximately 21 hours to canvass)

b. +50% = 10,133 (approximately 25.3 hours to canvass)

c. +75% = 11,821 (approximately 29.5 hours to canvass)

d. +100% = 13,500 (approximately 33.75 hours to canvass)

e. +200% = 27,000 (approximately 67.5 hours to canvass)

f. All Pulaski County Voters = 250,000 (approximately 625 hours to canvass)

6. Using current procedures, the canvassing process would be less efficient due to the necessity of implementing personal safety protocols to prevent the transmission of COVID-19.

***7. Absentee ballots will be tabulated on a DS-450 high speed tabulation device.*** Should the need arise, Canvassers will also manually feed absentee ballots into a number of DS-200 ballot scanners to supplement the DS-450.

***8. Recruiting sufficient numbers of absentee canvassers would pose a significant challenge.***

a. Absentee canvassers require specialized skills and traits to be effective. Experience has proven that selecting the right people for these positions is essential.

b. People with a higher risk of adverse outcomes related to COVID-19 are overrepresented in the available poll worker population.

c. Some of the experienced canvassers may be unwilling or unable to work due to Covid-19

d. The pool of potential canvassers will be diminished because some people will not be willing to work in proximity with others given the viral threat. Other community groups who rely on volunteers have seen a sharp decline in participation.

9. Procedures will have to be put in place to ensure the health and safety of commission staff and absentee canvassers.
  - a. Canvassers would require personal protective equipment, hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes to safely process the absentee ballots.
  - b. Physical distancing would have to be maintained in the canvassing process.
  - c. Based on guidance from public health officials, absentee ballot envelopes may be compromised for more than 24 hours. A sanitization process prior to canvassing may be necessary.
10. Additionally, there may be increased demands on staff to address other issues which may affect oversight of the absentee process.

### **Proposed Changes to Address Increase in Absentee Ballots Cast**

1. Increase the number of Absentee Canvassers to 72
  - a. Two Chief Judges
  - b. Two Assistant Chief Judges
  - c. Three Runners
  - d. 60 Canvassers – 30 teams
  - e. 5 experienced Canvassers to review Irregular Absentee Ballots
2. The Increase in canvassers would:
  - a. Represent the maximum number of canvassers that could reasonably be managed with the resources available.
  - b. Approximately 1,200 ballots could be canvassed per hour
  - c. Given the same 56 total hours available for work, the total number of absentee ballots that could theoretically be canvassed increases to 67,000.
3. Additional space will be required:
  - a. To accommodate social distancing and changes in workflow, at least four times the space will be needed.
  - b. The unfinished space in the back of the Pulaski Regional building in its entirety would likely be sufficient, however, significant health/safety and sound mitigation efforts would need to be implemented to make the space functional.
4. Tabulating the absentee ballots on will require a substantial amount of time and a significant number of personnel. Absentee workers diverted to tabulating ballots on Election Day would reduce the ability to conduct other required absentee processes.
  - a. Tabulation will be performed using the DS450 Central Scanner, supplemented by DS200 Precinct Scanners.
  - b. The DS450 can tabulate up to 3000 ballots per hour, although is cannot be used continuously for extended periods. It will also require a designated staff member to operate the machine.

c. In a recent recount, two M-100 ballot scanners were used to count 5,400 ballots which took 5-6 hours. The M-100 and the DS-200 have essentially the same throughput, which equates *to potential throughput of approximately 500 ballots tabulated per hour per machine.*

d. For workers to tabulate 67,000 ballots in the 10 hours allowed on Election Day (Absentee results should be reported as close to Polls Close as practical), 7 DS-200 ballot scanners would need to run nonstop beginning at 8:30, in addition to the DS450.

### **Security Measures taken to ensure the integrity of Absentee Canvassing and Tabulation**

1. Only authorized county employees or sworn election officials will have access to election related materials and absentee ballots.
2. Only authorized county employees or sworn election officials will be allowed into secure areas containing election related materials or absentee ballots.
3. Standard security measures will be used to ensure the security of ballots and election materials, including a well-documented chain of custody.
  - a. Ballots will be delivered to the Clerk's office and stored in a secure area within the Courthouse. Only authorized Clerk's staff will have access to the ballots and the area where they stored. Quantities of each ballot style will be documented and logged upon receipt from the printer.
  - b. Ballot Boxes will be delivered to the Clerk's office by the Commission staff and stored in a secure area within the Courthouse. Only authorized Clerk's staff will have access to the ballots and the area where they stored. The boxes will be sealed with a numbered seal and the seal numbers documented on the appropriate log.
  - c. Upon the commencement of the canvassing process, the absentee chief judge and Commission staff will receive and transport the ballots to absentee canvassing area. Both individuals will sign the log acknowledging the receipt of the ballots from the Clerk. The seal will be broken and the seal number recorded on the appropriate log, and the canvassing process will begin.
  - d. At the end of the canvassing process on a given day, all ballot materials will be sealed, seal numbers will be documented on the appropriate log, and the materials will be stored within a secure location within the Election Commission Office, accessible only to authorized members of the staff.
  - e. The next day, the ballot materials will be retrieved, and canvassing will resume. The process for securing the materials will then be repeated, day after day, until all canvassing is complete.
  - f. In preparation for the tabulation process, ballot only envelopes will be opened by the absentee workers and placed in ballot transport boxes. The boxes will be sealed with a numbered seal, and the seal number documented. All sealed ballot transport boxes will

be kept in a secure area within the Election Commission office, accessible only to authorized members of the staff.

g. When the tabulation process begins, one ballot transport box at a time will have the seal broken, recorded in the appropriate log, and its contents removed for tabulation. After the ballots have been tabulated, they will be placed back into the original ballot transport box, the sealed with a numbered seal, and documented on the appropriate log. The completed ballot transport box will then be prominently marked “Counted” and stored in kept in a secure area within the Election Commission office, accessible only to authorized members of the staff.

h. At the completion of the tabulation process, all sealed ballot transport boxes will be transported to and stored at Election Commission warehouse by members of the staff.

### **Processing and Disposition of Irregular Absentee Ballots**

1. A surge in absentee ballots submitted would likely create a concurrent surge in irregular absentee ballots; This might necessitate the Election Commission scheduling additional meetings to determine the disposition of these additional irregular absentee ballots.
  - a. These meetings may be scheduled as needed after Election Day.
  - b. Depending on the volume of irregular absentee ballots, multiple meetings may be required.