



July 30, 2020

Honorable Christopher Piper  
Commissioner, Department of Elections  
Washington Building  
1100 Bank Street, Floor 1  
Richmond, VA 23219-3642

Dear Commissioner Piper:

Re: Deadlines for Mailing Ballots

With the 2020 General Election rapidly approaching, this letter follows up on my letter dated May 29, 2020, which I sent to election officials throughout the country. That letter highlighted some key aspects of the Postal Service's delivery processes. The purpose of this letter is to focus specifically on the deadlines for requesting and casting ballots by mail. In particular, we wanted to note that, under our reading of Virginia's election laws, certain deadlines for requesting and casting mail-in ballots may be incongruous with the Postal Service's delivery standards. This mismatch creates a risk that ballots requested near the deadline under state law will not be returned by mail in time to be counted under your laws as we understand them.

As I stated in my May 29 letter, the two main classes of mail that are used for ballots are First-Class Mail and USPS Marketing Mail, the latter of which includes the Nonprofit postage rate. Voters must use First-Class Mail (or an expedited level of service) to mail their ballots and ballot requests, while state or local election officials may generally use either First-Class Mail or Marketing Mail to mail blank ballots to voters. While the specific transit times for either class of mail cannot be guaranteed, and depend on factors such as a given mailpiece's place of origin and destination, most domestic First-Class Mail is delivered 2-5 days after it is received by the Postal Service, and most domestic Marketing Mail is delivered 3-10 days after it is received.

To account for these delivery standards and to allow for contingencies (e.g., weather issues or unforeseen events), the Postal Service strongly recommends adhering to the following timeframe when using the mail to transmit ballots to domestic voters:

- **Ballot requests:** Where voters will both receive and send a ballot by mail, voters should submit their ballot request early enough so that it is received by their election officials at least 15 days before Election Day at a minimum, and preferably long before that time.
- **Mailing blank ballots to voters:** In responding to a ballot request, election officials should consider that the ballot needs to be in the hands of the voter so that he or she has adequate time to complete it and put it back in the mail stream so that it can be processed and delivered by the applicable deadline. Accordingly, the Postal Service recommends that election officials use First-Class Mail to transmit blank ballots and allow 1 week for delivery to voters. Using Marketing Mail will result in slower delivery times and will increase the risk that voters will not receive their ballots in time to return them by mail.

- **Mailing completed ballots to election officials:** To allow enough time for ballots to be returned to election officials, domestic voters should generally mail their completed ballots at least one week before the state's due date. In states that allow mail-in ballots to be counted if they are *both* postmarked by Election Day *and* received by election officials by a specific date that is less than a week after Election Day, voters should mail their ballots at least one week before they must be received by election officials. So, for example, if state law requires a mail-in ballot to be postmarked by Tuesday, November 3, and received by Friday, November 6, voters should mail their ballot by Friday, October 30, to allow enough time for the ballots to be delivered by November 6. Voters must also be aware of the posted collection times on collection boxes and at the Postal Service's retail facilities and that ballots entered after the last posted collection time on a given day will not be postmarked until the following business day.

Under our reading of your state's election laws, as in effect on July 27, 2020, certain state-law requirements and deadlines appear to be incompatible with the Postal Service's delivery standards and the recommended timeframe noted above. As a result, to the extent that the mail is used to transmit ballots to and from voters, there is a significant risk that, at least in certain circumstances, ballots may be requested in a manner that is consistent with your election rules and returned promptly, and yet not be returned in time to be counted.

Specifically, it appears that a voter may generally request a ballot as late as 11 days before the election, and that a completed ballot must be postmarked by Election Day and received by election officials no later than 3 days after the election. It also appears that election officials have 3 business days to transmit a ballot to the voter in response to a request. If a voter submits a request at or near the ballot-request deadline, and if the election official transmits the ballot to the voter by mail 3 business days later, there is a risk that the voter will not receive the ballot before the postmarking deadline or have sufficient time to complete and mail the completed ballot back to election officials in time for it to arrive by the state's receipt deadline. Also, please note that, given the delivery standards for First-Class Mail, there is a risk that completed ballots postmarked on Election Day itself will not be delivered in time to meet the state's receipt deadline of November 6. As noted above, voters who choose to mail their ballots should do so no later than Friday, October 30.

To be clear, the Postal Service is not purporting to definitively interpret the requirements of your state's election laws, and also is not recommending that such laws be changed to accommodate the Postal Service's delivery standards. By the same token, however, the Postal Service cannot adjust its delivery standards to accommodate the requirements of state election law. For this reason, the Postal Service asks that election officials keep the Postal Service's delivery standards and recommendations in mind when making decisions as to the appropriate means used to send a piece of Election Mail to voters, and when informing voters how to successfully participate in an election where they choose to use the mail. It is particularly important that voters be made aware of the transit times for mail (including mail-in ballots) so that they can make informed decisions about whether and when to (1) request a mail-in ballot, and (2) mail a completed ballot back to election officials.

We remain committed to sustaining the mail as a secure, efficient, and effective means to allow citizens to participate in the electoral process when election officials determine to utilize the mail as a part of their election system. Ensuring that you have an understanding of our operational capabilities and recommended timelines, and can educate voters accordingly, is important to achieving a successful election season. Please reach out to your assigned election mail coordinator to discuss the logistics of your mailings and the services that are available as well as any questions you may have. A list of election mail coordinators may be found on our website at: <https://about.usps.com/election-mail/political-election-mail-coordinators.pdf>.

We hope the information contained in this letter is helpful, and please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas J. Marshall". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Thomas" and last name "Marshall" clearly distinguishable.

Thomas J. Marshall