



Numbered Memo 2020-23

TO: County Boards of Elections
FROM: Sam Hayes, Executive Director
RE: In-Person Return of Absentee Ballots
DATE: September 4, 2026¹

Absentee-by-mail voters may choose to return their ballot by mail or in person. Voters who return their ballot in person may return it to the county board of elections office by 7:30 p.m. on Election Day or to any early voting site in the county during the early voting period. This numbered memo provides guidance and recommendations for the safe, secure, and controlled in-person return of absentee ballots.

General Information

Who May Return a Ballot

For most voters, only the voter, or the voter's near relative or legal guardian, is permitted to hand-deliver an absentee ballot.² For voters who need assistance returning their absentee ballot due to a disability, any person of that voter's choice may return the absentee ballot for the voter, which could include a bipartisan assistance team (MAT).³ Outside of this disability exception, neither a MAT member nor any other person may take possession of an absentee ballot, unless they are the voter's near relative or legal guardian.

Intake of Absentee Ballots and Accompanying Photo ID Documentation

As outlined in [Numbered Memo 2021-03](#), trained county board staff shall review each ballot container-return envelope and accompanying photocopy of the voter's photo ID or a completed Photo ID Exception Form (photo ID documentation) that are transmitted to the county board, to

¹ This numbered memo was originally issued on September 22, 2020, and then was updated on September 29, 2023. This updated memo issued on September 4, 2026, was approved by a vote of the State Board on September 4, 2026.

² It is a class I felony for any person other than the voter's near relative or legal guardian to take possession of an absentee ballot of another voter for delivery or for return to a county board of elections. N.C.G.S. § 163-226.3(a)(5); see also N.C.G.S. § 163-231(b)(1).

³ See [Numbered Memo 2022-11](#).

determine if there are any deficiencies that can be cured or will require the ballot to be spoiled and a new ballot package reissued. Typically, depending on the intake volume, staff review of the absentee ballot materials for acceptability occurs at a later time. But nothing prohibits staff from advising a person returning a ballot of any deficiencies that are noted at intake which would permit the voter to promptly correct those deficiencies.

Although a hand-delivered absentee ballot is not required to be enclosed in an outer return envelope (which is used for mailing), the ballot must be sealed in the container-return envelope for it to be accepted. If the voter is returning their ballot and it is unsealed, the voter should be instructed to seal the ballot in the container-return envelope. If someone other than the voter is returning the ballot and it is unsealed, county board staff should take possession of the ballot then inform the person that the ballot must be sealed by the voter or in the voter's presence and a new ballot will be issued to the voter. County board staff shall ask the person if they are accompanied by the voter (e.g., the voter is waiting in the parking lot) and, if so, invite the voter to seal the envelope. If not, then the county board shall follow the process for spoiling and reissuing the absentee ballot package.⁴

It is not recommended that county board staff serve as a witness for a voter while on duty since staff may need to make determinations about the ballot acceptance or other decisions pertaining to the absentee balloting process. However, staff who are not involved in the review of absentee ballot envelopes may be permitted to serve as a witness since the potential for a conflict would not exist and this would provide a service to a voter that may have no other way to meet the witness requirements.

Copying a Voter's Photo ID for a Voter Hand-Delivering an Absentee Ballot

A voter, or any person permitted to return an absentee ballot as noted above, may request that staff make a photocopy of the voter's photo ID to accompany the container-return envelope when hand-delivering an absentee ballot to the county board of elections office. Early voting sites are not required to have a copier available for this purpose, but a county may choose to do so if it has the available resources and staff.

If the photo ID is a type of ID acceptable for voting purposes under 08 NCAC 17 .0101(a)(1), staff are required to make a photocopy of the voter's photo ID at no cost to the voter, and to ensure that the photocopy is readable so it will be deemed acceptable when it is reviewed by the county board.⁵ Staff do not need to complete the assistant section of the ballot envelope when

⁴ N.C.G.S. § 163-231(a)(3). See [Numbered Memo 2021-03](#) for further information on return deficiencies.

⁵ See 08 NCAC 17 .0109(e). Staff should consult the list of approved photo IDs that has been distributed by the State Board to determine whether the photo ID is an acceptable type. If the photo ID requested to

performing this task. After staff have made the photocopy of the photo ID, they should return the photo ID to the person delivering the absentee ballot, and then have that person place the photocopy of the photo ID in the clear sleeve used for this purpose on the container-return envelope before handing it over to staff for intake. If the outer return envelope is already sealed, staff should open the return envelope so that the person can accomplish this task.⁶ To avoid confusion when staff is later reviewing the absentee ballot materials for deficiencies, the intake staff person should note on the return envelope that it was opened to allow photo ID documentation to be provided in person.

Log Requirement

An administrative rule requires county boards to keep a written log when any person—including the voter—returns an absentee ballot in person.⁷ The contents of the log are prescribed in the administrative rule, and county boards shall use the form provided by the State Board which complies with this rule. Intake staff shall note on the log the date that it was received.

Because of the log requirement, **an absentee ballot may not be left in an unattended drop box.**

Board Consideration of Delivery and Log Requirements

When a county board considers whether to approve an absentee ballot application at an absentee meeting, the county board is permitted to consider whether the delivery of the absentee ballot complied with the logging requirement in 08 NCAC 18 .0102 in conjunction with other evidence to determine whether the container-return envelope has been properly executed. For example, the delivery log should be reviewed along with the application to determine if a person assisted the

be copied is not an acceptable type, then staff should inform the person of this fact and invite the person to provide for copying any other photo ID that is acceptable.

⁶ Intake staff do not conduct a review of whether the person hand-delivering the absentee ballot reasonably resembles the photo on the photo ID when the absentee ballot is hand-delivered at the county board office or an early voting site, because that is not a requirement for absentee voting. See 08 NCAC 17 .0109.

⁷ 08 NCAC 18 .0102 requires that, upon delivery, the person delivering the ballot shall provide the following information in writing: (1) Name of voter; (2) Name of person delivering ballot; (3) Relationship to voter; (4) Phone number (if available) and current address of person delivering ballot; (5) Date and time of delivery of ballot; and (6) Signature or mark of person delivering ballot certifying that the information provided is true and correct and that the person is the voter or the voter's near relative.

voter in returning their ballot in person due to the voter's disability, because in that scenario they should complete the assistant certification on the application.⁸

Failure to comply with the logging requirement is not sufficient evidence in and of itself to establish that the voter did not lawfully vote their ballot.⁹ A county board shall not disapprove an absentee ballot solely because the person who delivered the ballot did not complete the log confirming they were a person authorized to possess and return the ballot.

The county board should follow the process in [Numbered Memo 2021-03](#) to spoil and reissue an absentee ballot when the county board has specific, first-hand information that the ballot was delivered by a person other than the voter, the voter's near relative, the voter's legal guardian, or a person of the voter's choice when the voter needs assistance due to disability. This specific information would be reflected on the log when the person indicates they are not one of the persons authorized by law to possess and return an absentee ballot. This information would also be known if the person informed staff receiving the ballot that they were not a person authorized to return the ballot, in which case staff should document that information in writing. Return by any other person is not authorized in law and is a felony, and the matter should be documented in writing and reported to the State Board's [Investigations Division](#).¹⁰

Return at a County Board Office

A voter may return their absentee ballot to the county board of elections office any time the office is open. A county board must ensure its office is staffed during regular business hours to allow for return of absentee ballots until the end of Election Day. A county board is not required to accept absentee ballots outside of regular business hours. Similar to procedures at the close of polls on Election Day, if an individual is in line at the county board office at the absentee ballot return deadline (7:30 p.m. on Election Day), a county board shall accept receipt of the ballot.

If a county board office has a mail drop or unattended drop box used for other purposes, the county board must affix a sign stating that voters may not place their ballots in the drop box.

In determining the setup of a county board office for in-person return of absentee ballots, the county board should consider and plan for the following:

- Ensure adequate parking, especially if the county board office will be used as an early voting site.

⁸ See [Numbered Memo 2022-11](#).

⁹ 08 NCAC 18 .0102 ("Failure to comply with this Rule shall not constitute evidence sufficient in and of itself to establish that the voter did not lawfully vote his or her ballot.").

¹⁰ N.C.G.S. § 163-226.3(a)(5); see also N.C.G.S. § 163-231(b)(1).

- Provide signage directing voters to the location to return their absentee ballot.
- Ensure the security of absentee ballots and the privacy of the photo ID documentation that accompanies the absentee ballot. Use a locked or securable container for returned absentee ballots that cannot be readily removed by an unauthorized person.
- If the set-up allows the return of ballots outside, plan for the possibility of severe weather, including the use of a tent or other covering. The county board must also have a plan for how crowd control will occur without the physical barriers of an office and the security of staff and the balloting materials. For safety reasons, it is not recommended to keep an outside return location open after dark or during inclement weather.

Return at an Early Voting Site

Location to Return Absentee Ballots

Each early voting site shall have at least one designated, staffed station for the return of absentee ballots. Return of absentee ballots shall occur at that station. The station may be set up exclusively for absentee ballot returns or may provide other services, such as a help desk, provided the absentee ballots can be accounted for and secured separately from other ballots or processes. Similar to accepting absentee ballots at the county board of elections office, the county board should consider and plan for the following with the setup of an early voting location for in-person return of absentee ballots:

- Have a plan for how crowd control will occur and how voters will be directed to the appropriate location for in-person return of absentee ballots.
- Provide signage directing voters.
- Ensure adequate parking and sufficient space for long lines.
- If the set-up allows the return of ballots outside, plan for the possibility of severe weather, including the use of a tent or other covering. The county board must also have a plan for how crowd control will occur without the physical barriers of a building and the security of election officials, staff, and the balloting materials. For safety reasons, ensure that there is adequate lighting as voting hours will continue past dark.

Because absentee ballots must be returned to a designated station, absentee ballots should not be returned in the curbside area.

Procedures

Absentee ballots that are hand-delivered must be placed in a secured container upon receipt, similar to how provisional ballots are securely stored at voting sites. Absentee-by-mail ballots delivered to an early voting site must be stored separately from all other ballots in a container designated only for absentee-by-mail ballots. The secure storage of absentee-by-mail ballots is also important because these ballots will be accompanied by photo ID documentation, which could contain confidential information. County boards must also conduct regular reconciliation practices between the log and the absentee ballots. County boards are not required by the State

Board to log returned ballots into SOSA, the State Board's electronic pollbooks for early voting; however, a county board may require their early voting site staff to complete SOSA logging.

If a voter brings in an absentee ballot and does not want to vote it, the ballot should be placed in the spoiled-ballot bag in such a way that will distinguish it from ballots issued to the voting site when later performing reconciliation. Voters who call the county board office and do not want to vote their absentee ballot should be encouraged to discard the ballot at home.

Return at an Election Day Site

An absentee ballot may not be returned at an Election Day polling place. If a voter appears in person with their ballot at a polling place on Election Day, they shall be instructed that they may (1) take their ballot to the county board office by 7:30 p.m. so it is received by the deadline; or (2) have the absentee ballot spoiled and vote in-person at their polling place.

If someone other than the voter appears with the ballot, they shall be instructed to take it to the county board office.