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HOUSE BILL NO. 1948

Offered January 11, 2023

Prefiled January 10, 2023

A BILL to amend and reenact §§ 24.2-702.1, 24.2-704, 24.2-706, and 24.2-707 of the Code of Virginia, relating to absentee voting; witness requirement; required information on return ballot envelope.

Patron—Bloxom

Referred to Committee on Privileges and Elections

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That §§ 24.2-702.1, 24.2-704, 24.2-706, and 24.2-707 of the Code of Virginia are amended and reenacted as follows:

§ 24.2-702.1. Federal write-in absentee ballots.

A. Notwithstanding any other provision of this title, a covered voter, as defined in § 24.2-452, may use a federal write-in absentee ballot in any election. Such ballot shall be submitted and processed in the manner provided by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (52 U.S.C. § 20301 et seq.) and this article.

B. Notwithstanding any other provision of this title, a federal write-in absentee ballot submitted pursuant to subsection A shall be considered valid for purposes of simultaneously satisfying both an absentee ballot application and a completed absentee ballot, provided that the ballot is received no later than the deadline for the return of absentee ballots as provided in § 24.2-709 for the election in which the voter offers to vote, and the application contains the following information: (i) the voter's signature; however, if the voter is unable to sign, the person assisting the voter will note this fact in the voter signature box; (ii) the voter's printed name; (iii) *the voter's date of birth*; (iv) *the last four digits of the voter's social security number*; (v) the county or city in which ~~he~~ *the voter* is registered and offers to vote; ~~(iv)~~ (vi) the residence address at which ~~he~~ *the voter* is registered to vote; ~~(v)~~ *his* and (vii) *the voter's* current military or overseas address; and ~~(vi)~~ *the signature of a witness who shall sign the same application.*

C. This section shall not be construed to require that an absentee ballot be sent to the absentee voter on receipt of a federal write-in absentee ballot unless the voter has also submitted an absentee ballot application pursuant to § 24.2-701.

§ 24.2-704. Applications and ballots for persons requiring assistance in voting; penalty.

A. The application for an absentee ballot shall provide space for the applicant to indicate that he will require assistance to vote his absentee ballot by reason of blindness, disability, or inability to read or write.

B. On receipt of an application from an applicant who indicated that he will require assistance due to a visual impairment or print disability, the general registrar shall offer to provide to the applicant a ballot marking tool with screen reader assistive technology made available pursuant to § 24.2-103.2. If the applicant opts to use such tool, the general registrar shall send by mail to him a ballot return envelope and accessible instructions provided by the Department for using such tool and returning the marked ballot. The general registrar shall cause the outer envelope containing the ballot return envelope and accessible instructions to have a tactile marking that identifies the outer envelope as the outer envelope to the voter. For purposes of this section, "tactile marking" includes a hole punch, a cut corner, or a tactile sticker.

An absentee voter using such tool shall return the marked absentee ballot in accordance with the instructions provided by the Department.

No ballot marked with the electronic ballot marking tool shall be rejected because the ballot was printed on regular paper. No ballot marked with the electronic ballot marking tool shall be rejected on the basis of the position of the voter's signature or address on the ballot return envelope as long as the voter's signature or address is anywhere on the ballot return envelope.

C. On receipt of an application from an applicant marked to indicate that he will require assistance due to any other disability or if an applicant offered the ballot marking tool pursuant to subsection B declines to use such tool, the general registrar shall deliver, with the items required by § 24.2-706, the voter assistance form furnished by the State Board pursuant to § 24.2-649. The voter and any person assisting him shall complete the form by signing the request for assistance and statement required of the assistant. If the voter is unable to sign the request, the ~~witness~~ *person assisting him* will note this fact on the line for signature of voter. The provisions of § 24.2-649 shall apply to absentee voting and assistance for absentee voters. Any person who willfully violates the provisions of this section or

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59 § 24.2-649 in providing assistance to a person who is voting absentee shall be guilty of a Class 5
60 felony.

61 **§ 24.2-706. Duty of general registrar on receipt of application; statement of voter.**

62 A. On receipt of an application for an absentee ballot, the general registrar shall enroll the name and
63 address of each registered applicant on an absentee voter applicant list that shall be maintained in the
64 office of the general registrar with a file of the applications received. The list shall be available for
65 inspection and copying and the applications shall be available for inspection only by any registered voter
66 during regular office hours. Upon request and for a reasonable fee, the Department of Elections shall
67 provide an electronic copy of the absentee voter applicant list to any political party or candidate. Such
68 list shall be used only for campaign and political purposes. Any list made available for inspection and
69 copying under this section shall contain the post office box address in lieu of the residence street
70 address for any individual who has furnished at the time of registration or subsequently, in addition to
71 his street address, a post office box address pursuant to subsection B of § 24.2-418.

72 No list or application containing an individual's social security number, or any part thereof, or the
73 individual's day and month of birth, shall be made available for inspection or copying by anyone. The
74 Department of Elections shall prescribe procedures for general registrars to make the information in the
75 lists and applications available in a manner that does not reveal social security numbers or parts thereof,
76 or an individual's day and month of birth.

77 B. The completion and timely delivery of an application for an absentee ballot shall be construed to
78 be an offer by the applicant to vote in the election.

79 The general registrar shall note on each application received whether the applicant is or is not a
80 registered voter. In reviewing the application for an absentee ballot, the general registrar shall not reject
81 the application of any individual because of an error or omission on any record or paper relating to the
82 application, if such error or omission is not material in determining whether such individual is qualified
83 to vote absentee.

84 C. If the application has been properly completed and signed and the applicant is a registered voter
85 of the precinct in which he offers to vote, the general registrar shall, at the time when the printed ballots
86 for the election are available, send by the deadline set out in § 24.2-612, obtaining a certificate or other
87 evidence of either first-class or expedited mailing or delivery from the United States Postal Service or
88 other commercial delivery provider, or deliver to him in person in the office of the registrar, the
89 following items and nothing else:

90 1. An envelope containing the folded ballot, sealed and marked "Ballot within. ~~Do not open except~~
91 ~~in presence of a witness.~~"

92 2. An envelope for resealing the marked ballot, on which envelope is printed the following:

93 "Statement of Voter."

94 "I do hereby state, subject to felony penalties for making false statements pursuant to § 24.2-1016,
95 that my FULL NAME is (last, first, middle); that I am now or have been at some time since last
96 November's general election a legal resident of ____ (STATE YOUR LEGAL RESIDENCE IN
97 VIRGINIA including the house number, street name or rural route address, city, zip code); that I
98 received the enclosed ballot(s) upon application to the registrar of such county or city; that I opened the
99 envelope marked 'ballot within' and marked the ballot(s) ~~in the presence of the witness~~, without
100 assistance or knowledge on the part of anyone as to the manner in which I marked it (or I am returning
101 the form required to report how I was assisted); that I then sealed the ballot(s) in this envelope; and that
102 I have not voted and will not vote in this election at any other time or place.

103 Signature of Voter _____

104 Last four digits of voter's social security number _____

105 Voter's date of birth _____

106 Date _____

107 Signature of witness _____ "

108 For elections held after January 1, 2004, instead of the envelope containing the above oath, an
109 envelope containing the standard oath prescribed by the presidential designee under § 101(b)(7) of the
110 Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (52 U.S.C. § 20301 et seq.) shall be sent to
111 voters who are qualified to vote absentee under that Act.

112 When this statement has been properly completed and signed by the registered voter ~~and witnessed~~,
113 his ballot shall not be subject to challenge pursuant to § 24.2-651.

114 3. An envelope, properly addressed and postage prepaid, for the return of the ballot to the general
115 registrar by mail or by the applicant in person, or to a drop-off location.

116 4. Printed instructions for completing the ballot and statement on the envelope and returning the
117 ballot. Such instructions shall include information on the sites of all drop-off locations in the county or
118 city. Whenever there is a proposed constitutional amendment or a statewide referendum to be voted on
119 by the voters, these instructions shall also include the website address where the explanation of the
120 proposed amendment prepared pursuant to § 30-19.9 or the information about the referendum prepared

pursuant to § 30-19.10 is posted on the Department's website.

For federal elections held after January 1, 2004, for any voter who is required by subparagraph (b) of 52 U.S.C. § 21083 of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 to show identification the first time the voter votes in a federal election in the state, the printed instructions shall direct the voter to submit with his ballot (i) a copy of a current and valid photo identification or (ii) a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck or other government document that shows the name and address of the voter. Such individual who desires to vote by mail but who does not submit one of the forms of identification specified in this paragraph may cast such ballot by mail and the ballot shall be counted as a provisional ballot under the provisions of § 24.2-653.01. The Department of Elections shall provide instructions to the electoral boards for the handling and counting of such provisional ballots pursuant to § 24.2-653.01 and this section.

5. For any voter entitled to vote absentee under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (52 U.S.C. § 20301 et seq.), information provided by the Department of Elections specific to the voting rights and responsibilities for such citizens, or information provided by the registrar specific to the status of the voter registration and absentee ballot application of such voter, may be included.

The envelopes and instructions shall be in the form prescribed by the Department of Elections.

D. The general registrar may contract with a third party for the printing, assembly, and mailing of the items set forth in subsection C. The general registrar shall provide to the contractor in a timely manner the names, addresses, precincts, and ballot styles of voters requesting an absentee ballot by mail. The vendor shall provide to the general registrar a report of the voters to whom the absentee ballot materials have been sent.

E. If the applicant completes his application in person under § 24.2-701 at a time when the printed ballots for the election are available, he may request that the general registrar send to him by mail the items set forth in subdivisions C 1 through 4, instead of casting the ballot in person. Such request shall be made no later than 5:00 p.m. on the eleventh day prior to the election in which the applicant offers to vote, and the general registrar shall send those items to the applicant by mail, obtaining a certificate or other evidence of mailing.

F. If the applicant is a covered voter, as defined in § 24.2-452, the general registrar, at the time when the printed ballots for the election are available, shall mail by the deadline set forth in § 24.2-612 or deliver in person to the applicant in the office of the general registrar the items as set forth in subdivisions C 1 through 4 and, if necessary, an application for registration. A certificate or other evidence of mailing shall not be required. If the applicant requests that such items be sent by electronic transmission, the general registrar, at the time when the printed ballots for the election are available but not later than the deadline set forth in § 24.2-612, shall send by electronic transmission the blank ballot, the form for the envelope for returning the marked ballot, and instructions to the voter. Such materials shall be sent using the official email address or fax number of the office of the general registrar published on the Department of Elections website. The State Board of Elections may prescribe by regulation the format of the email address used for transmitting ballots to eligible voters. A general registrar may also use electronic transmission facilities provided by the Federal Voting Assistance Program. The voted ballot shall be returned to the general registrar as otherwise required by this chapter.

G. The circuit courts shall have jurisdiction to issue an injunction to enforce the provisions of this section upon the application of (i) any aggrieved voter, (ii) any candidate in an election district in whole or in part in the court's jurisdiction where a violation of this section has occurred, or is likely to occur, or (iii) the campaign committee or the appropriate district political party chairman of such candidate. Any person who fails to discharge his duty as provided in this section through willful neglect of duty and with malicious intent shall be guilty of a Class 1 misdemeanor as provided in subsection A of § 24.2-1001.

§ 24.2-707. How ballots marked and returned.

A. On receipt of a mailed absentee ballot, the voter shall, ~~in the presence of a witness,~~ (i) open the sealed envelope marked "ballot within" and (ii) mark and refold the ballot, as provided in §§ 24.2-644 and 24.2-646 without assistance and without making known how he marked the ballot, except as provided by § 24.2-704.

After the voter has marked his absentee ballot, he shall (a) enclose the ballot in the envelope provided for that purpose, (b) seal the envelope, (c) fill in and sign the statement printed on the back of the envelope ~~in the presence of a witness, who shall sign the same envelope,~~ (d) enclose the ballot envelope and any required assistance form within the envelope directed to the general registrar, and (e) seal that envelope. A voter's failure to provide in the statement on the back of the envelope his full middle name or his middle initial shall not be a material omission, rendering his ballot void, unless the voter failed to provide in the statement on the back of the envelope his full first and last name. A voter's failure to provide the date, or any part of the date, including the year, on which he signed the statement printed on the back of the envelope shall not be considered a material omission and shall not

182 render his ballot void. A voter's failure to have a witness sign the absentee ballot return envelope for
183 any election held during a declared state of emergency related to a communicable disease of public
184 health threat shall not be considered a material omission and shall not render his ballot void.

185 B. A mailed absentee ballot shall be returned (i) by mail to the office of the general registrar, (ii) by
186 the voter in person to the general registrar, or (iii) to a drop-off location established pursuant to §
187 24.2-707.1. For purposes of this subsection, "mail" includes a delivery by a commercial delivery service
188 but does not include delivery by a personal courier service or other individual except as provided by §§
189 24.2-703.2 and 24.2-705.

190 C. Failure to follow the procedures set forth in this section shall render the applicant's ballot void.