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## SENATE BILL NO. 1245

## AMENDMENT IN THE NATURE OF A SUBSTITUTE

(Proposed by the House Committee on Privileges and Elections  
on February 17, 2021)

(Patron Prior to Substitute—Senator Deeds)

A BILL to amend and reenact §§ 24.2-603, 24.2-704, 24.2-706, 24.2-707, 24.2-709, 24.2-709.1, 24.2-710, 24.2-711, and 24.2-712 of the Code of Virginia and to amend the Code of Virginia by adding sections numbered 24.2-103.2 and 24.2-707.1, relating to absentee voting; establishment of drop-off locations; preprocessing of returned absentee ballots before election day; cure process; accessibility for voters with visual impairment or print disability.

1. That §§ 24.2-603, 24.2-704, 24.2-706, 24.2-707, 24.2-709, 24.2-709.1, 24.2-710, 24.2-711, and 24.2-712 of the Code of Virginia are amended and reenacted and that the Code of Virginia is amended by adding sections numbered 24.2-103.2 and 24.2-707.1 as follows:

**§ 24.2-103.2. Duties of the Department of Elections related to accessible absentee voting.**

The Department of Elections shall make available to all localities a tool to allow a voter with a visual impairment or print disability to electronically and accessibly receive and mark his absentee ballot using screen reader assistive technology. The Department shall develop instructions regarding the use and availability of such tool, including instructions on making the tool available to voters and counting ballots voted with such tool.

**§ 24.2-603. Hours polls to be open; closing the polls.**

At all elections, the polls shall be open at each polling place at 6:00 a.m. on the day of the election and closed at 7:00 p.m. on the same day except as provided for central absentee voter precincts pursuant to subsection F G of § 24.2-712.

At 6:45 p.m. an officer of election shall announce that the polls will close in fifteen minutes. The officers of election shall list the names of all qualified voters in line before the polling place at 7:00 p.m. and permit those voters and no others to vote after 7:00 p.m.

**§ 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. Ballots marked with the electronic ballot marking tool shall not be required to be completed in the presence of a witness, and no such ballot shall be rejected for lack of a witness signature.

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

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

A. On receipt of an application for an absentee ballot, the general registrar shall enroll the name and address of each registered applicant on an absentee voter applicant list that shall be maintained in the

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

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

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

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

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

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

88 2. An envelope, with printing only on the flap side, for resealing the marked ballot, on which  
89 envelope is printed the following:

90 "Statement of Voter."

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

100 Signature of Voter \_\_\_\_\_

101 Date \_\_\_\_\_

102 Signature of witness \_\_\_\_\_ "

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

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

109 3. A properly addressed envelope for the return of the ballot to the general registrar by mail or by  
110 the applicant in person, *or to a drop-off location*.

111 4. Printed instructions for completing the ballot and statement on the envelope and returning the  
112 ballot. *Such instructions shall include information on the sites of all drop-off locations in the county or*  
113 *city.*

114 For federal elections held after January 1, 2004, for any voter who is required by subparagraph (b) of  
115 52 U.S.C. § 21083 of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 to show identification the first time the voter  
116 votes in a federal election in the state, the printed instructions shall direct the voter to submit with his  
117 ballot (i) a copy of a current and valid photo identification or (ii) a copy of a current utility bill, bank  
118 statement, government check, paycheck or other government document that shows the name and address  
119 of the voter. Such individual who desires to vote by mail but who does not submit one of the forms of  
120 identification specified in this paragraph may cast such ballot by mail and the ballot shall be counted as  
121 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.

C. 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 B 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.

D. 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 B 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.

E. 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 and mail it to the office of the general registrar or deliver it personally to the general registrar. 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 render his ballot void. For purposes of this chapter, "mail" shall include delivery by a commercial delivery service, but shall not include delivery by a personal courier service or another individual except as provided by §§ 24.2-703.2 and 24.2-705.

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

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

#### **§ 24.2-707.1. Drop-off locations for return of absentee ballots.**

A. The general registrar of each county or city shall establish at the office of the general registrar and each voter satellite office in operation for an election a drop-off location for the purpose of allowing the deposit of completed absentee ballots for such election. On the day of the election, there

183 shall also be a drop-off location at each polling place in operation for the election. The general  
184 registrar may establish additional drop-off locations within the county or city as he deems necessary. All  
185 drop-off locations shall be accessible; be on public property, unless located at a polling place; and  
186 otherwise comply with any criteria for drop-off locations set by the Department.

187 B. The Department shall set standards for the establishment and operation of drop-off locations,  
188 including necessary security requirements. The Department shall submit such standards annually by  
189 October 1 to the Chairmen of the House and Senate Committees on Privileges and Elections, the Senate  
190 Committee on Finance and Appropriations, and the House Committee on Appropriations.

191 C. Not later than 55 days prior to any election, the general registrar shall post notice of the sites of  
192 the drop-off locations in the locality in the office of the general registrar and on the official website of  
193 the county or city. Such notice shall remain in the office of the general registrar and on the official  
194 website of the county or city for the duration of the period during which absentee ballots may be  
195 returned.

196 D. Absentee ballots shall be collected from drop-off locations in accordance with the instructions  
197 provided by the Department. Such instructions shall include chain of custody requirements and  
198 recordkeeping requirements. Absentee ballots shall be collected at least daily by (i) two officers of  
199 election or electoral board members representing the two major political parties where practicable or  
200 (ii) two employees from the office of the general registrar, unless the drop-off location is in the office of  
201 the general registrar, in which case the general registrar or an assistant general registrar may collect  
202 the absentee ballots.

203 **§ 24.2-709. Ballot to be returned in manner prescribed by law.**

204 A. Any ballot returned to the office of the general registrar or to a drop-off location in any manner  
205 except as prescribed by law shall be void. Absentee ballots shall be returned to the general registrar or  
206 to a drop-off location before the closing of the polls. Any voter who is in line to return an absentee  
207 ballot at a drop-off location by 7:00 p.m. on the day of the election shall be permitted to deposit his  
208 absentee ballot. The registrar receiving the ballot shall (i) seal the ballot in an envelope with the  
209 statement or declaration of the voter, or both, attached to the outside and (ii) mark on each envelope the  
210 date, time, and manner of delivery. No returned absentee ballot shall be deemed void because (a) the  
211 inner envelope containing the voted ballot is imperfectly sealed so long as the outside envelope  
212 containing the ballot envelope is sealed or (b) it is not returned sealed in the outside envelope so long  
213 as it is returned sealed in the inner envelope.

214 B. Notwithstanding the provisions of subsection A, any absentee ballot (i) returned to the general  
215 registrar after the closing of the polls on election day but before noon on the third day after the election  
216 and (ii) postmarked on or before the date of the election shall be counted pursuant to the procedures set  
217 forth in this chapter if the voter is found entitled to vote. For purposes of this subsection, a postmark  
218 shall include any other official indicia of confirmation of mailing by the United States Postal Service or  
219 other postal or delivery service.

220 C. Notwithstanding the provisions of subsection A, any absentee ballot (i) received after the close of  
221 the polls on any election day, (ii) received before 5:00 p.m. on the second business day before the State  
222 Board meets to ascertain the results of the election pursuant to this title, (iii) requested on or before but  
223 not sent by the deadline for making absentee ballots available under § 24.2-612, and (iv) cast by a  
224 covered voter, as defined in § 24.2-452, shall be counted pursuant to the procedures set forth in this  
225 chapter if the voter is found entitled to vote. The electoral board shall prepare an amended certified  
226 abstract, which shall include the results of such ballots, and shall deliver such abstract to the State Board  
227 by the business day prior to its meeting pursuant to this title, and shall deliver a copy of such abstract  
228 to the general registrar to be available for inspection when his office is open for business.

229 D. Notwithstanding the provisions of clause (i) of subsection B of § 24.2-427, an absentee ballot  
230 returned by a voter in compliance with § 24.2-707 and this section who dies prior to the counting of  
231 absentee ballots on election day shall be counted pursuant to the procedures set forth in this chapter if  
232 the voter is found to have been entitled to vote at the time that he returned the ballot.

233 **§ 24.2-709.1. Processing returned absentee ballots before election day; cure process.**

234 Each general registrar shall take one or more of the following measures as needed to expedite  
235 counting absentee ballots returned by mail before election day: (i) A. On receipt of an absentee ballot  
236 returned in person or by mail to the office of the general registrar or to a drop-off location before  
237 election day, the general registrar shall mark the date of receipt in the voter's record and shall examine  
238 the ballot envelopes envelope to verify completion of the required voter affirmation; (ii) mark the  
239 pollbook, or the absentee voter applicant list if the pollbook is not available, that the voter has voted; or  
240 (iii) open the sealed ballot envelopes and insert the ballots in optical scan counting equipment or other  
241 secure ballot container without initiating any ballot count totals. If the general registrar proceeds to open  
242 sealed ballot envelopes as provided in clause (iii), at A voter affirmation statement shall not be deemed  
243 to be incomplete on the sole basis of the voter's failure to provide (i) his full name or his middle initial,  
244 as long as the voter provided his full first and last name, or (ii) the date, or any part of the date,

including the year, on which he signed the statement.

B. If the voter affirmation has been completed as required, the general registrar may open the sealed ballot envelope and insert the ballot in optical scan counting equipment or other secure ballot container without initiating any ballot count totals. If a general registrar does not choose to do so, the sealed ballot envelope shall be deposited into a secure container provided for such purpose, in which it shall remain until the general registrar initiates the process of opening the sealed ballot envelopes deposited into the secure container and inserting such ballots into optical scan counting equipment without initiating any ballot count totals. Such process shall be at the general registrar's discretion at any time prior to the seventh day immediately preceding the election but shall be mandatory beginning on the seventh day immediately preceding the election.

At least two officers of election, one representing each political party, shall be present during all hours when a general registrar uses the expedited procedures sealed ballot envelopes are opened as authorized in or required by this section subsection. No person present while sealed ballot envelopes are opened and ballots are inserted into counting equipment or other secure ballot container pursuant to clause (iii) shall disclose any information concerning the ballots.

In the event that circumstances prevent a general registrar from complying with the provisions of this subsection, such failure shall not be grounds for contesting the election pursuant to Article 2 (§ 24.2-803 et seq.) of Chapter 8 and shall not invalidate the absentee ballots.

C. For any absentee ballot received by the Friday immediately preceding the day of the election, if the general registrar finds during the examination of the ballot envelope that the required voter affirmation was not correctly or completely filled out or that a procedure required by § 24.2-707 was not properly followed, and such error or failure would render the ballot void by law, the general registrar shall enter into the voter's record in the voter registration system that the absentee ballot has an issue requiring correction in order for it to be counted. This information shall be included on any absentee voter applicant list provided pursuant to subsection C of § 24.2-710.

Within three days of such finding, the registrar shall notify the voter in writing or by email of the error or failure and shall provide information to the voter on how to correct the issue so his ballot may be counted. The voter shall be entitled to make such necessary corrections before noon on the third day after the election, and his ballot shall then be counted pursuant to the procedures set forth in this chapter if he is found to be entitled to vote. No absentee ballot needing correction shall be delivered to the officers of election at the appropriate precinct until the voter is provided the opportunity to make the necessary corrections pursuant to this subsection.

The general registrar may issue a new absentee ballot to the voter if necessary and shall preserve the first ballot with other spoiled ballots.

#### **§ 24.2-710. Absentee voter applicant lists.**

On receipt of an absentee ballot, the electoral board or general registrar shall mark the date of receipt in the appropriate column opposite the name and address of the voter on the absentee voter applicant list maintained in the general registrar's office. A board member or registrar shall deposit the return envelope and the unopened ballot envelope in an appropriate container provided for the purpose, in which they shall remain until the day of the election, unless the registrar opts to open sealed ballot envelopes in order to expedite the counting of absentee ballots in accordance with § 24.2-709.1.

A. The provisions of this subsection shall apply only to those localities not using an electronic pollbook. On the day before the election, the general registrar shall (i) make out in triplicate on a form prescribed by the State Board the absentee voter applicant list containing the names of all persons who applied for an absentee ballot through the third day before the election and (ii) by noon on the day before the election, deliver two copies of the list to the electoral board. The general registrar shall make out a supplementary list containing the names of all persons voting absentee in person or applying to vote absentee pursuant to § 24.2-705 for delivery by 5:00 p.m. on the day before the election. The supplementary list shall be deemed part of the absentee voter applicant list and shall be prepared and delivered in accordance with the instructions of the State Board. The general registrar shall maintain one copy of the list in his office for two years as a public record open for inspection upon request during regular office hours.

B. On the day before the election, the electoral board shall deliver one copy of the list provided to it by the general registrar to the chief officer of election for each precinct. The list shall be attested by the secretary of the electoral board who shall be responsible for the delivery of the attested lists to the chief officer of election for each precinct.

Absentee ballots shall be accepted only from voters whose names appear on the attested list.

Before the polls close on the day of the election, the electoral board shall deliver the absentee ballot containers to, and obtain a receipt from, the officers of election at each appropriate precinct. Any ballot returned to the electoral board or general registrar prior to the closing of the polls, but after the ballot container has been delivered, shall be delivered in an appropriate container to the officers of election at

each appropriate precinct. The containers shall be sealed prior to delivery to the officers and shall contain the sealed absentee ballots, the accompanying return envelopes, and a copy of the absentee voter applicant list for each precinct.

If the county or city uses a central absentee voter precinct pursuant to § 24.2-712, the lists and containers shall be delivered, as provided in this section, to the officers of election for the absentee precinct.

Before noon on the day following the election, the general registrar shall deliver all applications for absentee ballots for the election, under seal, to the clerk of the circuit court for the county or city, except that the general registrar may retain all applications for absentee ballots until the electoral board has ascertained the results of the election pursuant to § 24.2-671, and has determined the validity of and counted all provisional ballots pursuant to § 24.2-653.01, at which point all applications shall then be delivered, under seal, to the clerk of the circuit court for the county or city. The clerk shall retain the sealed applications with the counted ballots.

The secretary of the electoral board shall deliver all absentee ballots received after the election to the clerk of the circuit court.

C. Upon request, the State Board shall provide an electronic copy of the absentee voter applicant list to any political party or candidate. Such lists shall be used only for campaign and political purposes. In no event shall any list furnished under this section contain (a) any voter's social security number or any part thereof, (b) any voter's day and month of birth, or (c) the residence address of any voter who has provided a post office box address to be used on public lists pursuant to § 24.2-418.

**§ 24.2-711. Duties of electoral board, general registrar, and officers of election.**

A. Before the polls open, the officers of election at each precinct shall mark, for each person on the absentee voter applicant list, the letters "AB" (meaning absentee ballot) in the voting record column on the pollbook. The pollbook may be so marked prior to election day by the general registrar, the secretary of the electoral board, or staff under the direction of the general registrar or the secretary, or when the pollbook is produced by the State Board pursuant to § 24.2-404. If the pollbook has been marked prior to election day, before the polls open the officers of election at each precinct shall check the marks for accuracy and make any additions or corrections required.

The chief officer of election shall keep the copy of the absentee voter applicant list in the polling place as a public record open for inspection upon request at all times while the polls are open.

If a voter, whose name appears on the absentee voter applicant list, has not returned an unused ballot and offers to vote in his precinct, the officers of election in the precinct shall determine the matter pursuant to §§ 24.2-653.1 and 24.2-708.

Immediately after the close of the polls, the container of absentee ballots shall be opened by the officers of election. As each ballot envelope is removed from the container, the name of the voter shall be called and checked as if the voter were voting in person. If the voter is found entitled to vote, an officer shall mark the voter's name on the pollbook with the first or next consecutive number from the voter count form, or shall enter that the voter has voted if the pollbook is in electronic form. The ballot envelope shall then be opened, and the ballot deposited in the ballot container without being unfolded or examined. If the voter is found not entitled to vote, the unopened envelope shall be rejected. An unopened envelope shall not be rejected on the sole basis of a voter's failure to provide in the statement on the back of the unopened envelope his full middle name or his middle initial, unless the voter also failed to provide his full first and last name. An unopened envelope shall not be rejected on the sole basis of 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. At least two officers of election, one representing each political party, shall write and sign a statement of the cause for rejection on the envelope or on an attachment to the envelope.

When all ballots have been accounted for and either voted or rejected, the officers shall place the empty ballot envelopes, the return envelopes, and any rejected ballot envelopes, in one envelope provided for the purpose and seal and deliver it with the ballots cast at the election as provided in this title.

B. Before noon on the day following the election, the general registrar shall deliver all applications for absentee ballots for the election, under seal, to the clerk of the circuit court for the county or city, except that the general registrar may retain all applications for absentee ballots until the electoral board has ascertained the results of the election pursuant to § 24.2-671, and has determined the validity of and counted all provisional ballots pursuant to § 24.2-653.01, at which point all applications shall then be delivered, under seal, to the clerk of the circuit court for the county or city. The clerk shall retain the sealed applications with the counted ballots.

C. The secretary of the electoral board shall deliver all absentee ballots received after the election to the clerk of the circuit court.

**§ 24.2-712. Central absentee voter precincts; counting ballots.**

A. Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the governing body of each county or city may shall

establish one or more central absentee voter precincts in the courthouse or other public buildings for the purpose of receiving, counting, and recording absentee ballots cast in the county or city. ~~The decision to establish any~~ A central absentee voter precinct shall be made by the governing body by ordinance; the ordinance shall state for which elections the precinct shall be used. The decision to abolish any absentee voter precinct shall be made by the governing body by ordinance. Immediate notification of either decision shall be sent to the Department of Elections and the electoral board.

B. Each central absentee voter precinct shall have at least three officers of election as provided for other precincts. The number of officers shall be determined by the electoral board and general registrar.

C. If any voter brings an unmarked ballot to the central absentee voter precinct on the day of the election, he shall be allowed to vote it. If any voter brings an unmarked ballot to the general registrar on or before the day of the election, he shall be allowed to vote it, and his ballot shall be delivered to the absentee voter precinct pursuant to § 24.2-710.

The officers at the absentee voter precinct shall determine any appeal by any other voter whose name appears on the absentee voter applicant list and who offers to vote in person. If the officers at the absentee voter precinct produce records showing the receipt of his application and the certificate or other evidence of mailing for the ballot, they shall deny his appeal. If the officers cannot produce such records, the voter shall be allowed to vote in person at the absentee voter precinct and have his vote counted with other absentee votes. If the voter's appeal is denied, the provisions of § 24.2-708 shall be applicable, and the officers shall advise the voter that he may vote on presentation of a statement signed by him that he has not received an absentee ballot and subject to felony penalties for making false statements pursuant to § 24.2-1016.

D. Absentee ballots ~~may shall~~ be processed as required by § ~~24.2-711~~ 24.2-709.1 by the officers of election at the central absentee voter precinct prior to the closing of the polls. In the case of machine-readable ballots, the ballot container ~~may shall~~ be opened and the absentee ballots ~~may shall~~ be inserted in the counting machines prior to the closing of the polls in accordance with procedures prescribed by the Department of Elections, including procedures to preserve ballot secrecy, but no ballot count totals by the machines shall be ~~initiated prior to transmitted outside of the central absentee voter precinct until after the closing of the polls.~~

In the case of absentee ballots that are counted by hand, the officers of election ~~may shall~~ begin tallying such ballots at any time after 3:00 p.m. on the day of the election in accordance with the procedures prescribed by the Department of Elections, including procedures to preserve ballot secrecy. No counts of such tallies shall be determined or transmitted outside of the central absentee voter precinct until after the closing of the polls.

The use of cellular telephones or other communication devices shall be prohibited in the central absentee voter precinct during such *processing and* tallying and until the closing of the polls. Any person present in the central absentee voter precinct shall sign a statement under oath that he will not transmit any counts prior to the closing of the polls. Any person who transmits any counts in violation of this section is guilty of a Class 1 misdemeanor.

E. As soon as the polls are closed in the county or city, the officers of election at the central absentee voter precinct shall proceed promptly to ascertain and record the total vote given by all absentee ballots and report the results in the manner provided for counting and reporting ballots generally in Article 4 (§ 24.2-643 et seq.) of Chapter 6.

F. The electoral board or general registrar may provide that the officers of election for a central absentee voter precinct may be assigned to work all or a portion of the time that the precinct is open on election day subject to the following conditions:

1. The chief officer and the assistant chief officer, appointed pursuant to § 24.2-115 to represent the two political parties, are on duty at all times; and

2. No officer, political party representative, or other candidate representative shall leave the precinct after any ballots have been counted until the polls are closed and the count for the precinct is completed and reported.

G. The general registrar may provide that the central absentee voter precinct will open after 6:00 a.m. on the day of the election provided that the office of the general registrar will be open for the receipt of absentee ballots until the central absentee voter precinct is open and that the officers of election for the central absentee voter precinct obtain the absentee ballots returned to the general registrar's office for the purpose of counting the absentee ballots at the central absentee voter precinct and provided further that the central absentee voter precinct is the same location as the office of the general registrar.

**2. That the Department of Elections shall convene a work group to consider and evaluate methods for sorting absentee ballots by the precinct of the voter casting the absentee ballot and reporting vote totals from absentee ballots separately by each precinct. The work group shall include such persons determined by the Department of Elections as necessary or appropriate. The work group**

429 shall organize no later than July 31, 2021, and shall complete its work no later than October 31,  
430 2021. If recommending any specific policies or legislative proposals, the work group, through the  
431 Commissioner of Elections, shall communicate such recommendations to the Chairmen of the  
432 House and Senate Committees on Privileges and Elections by November 15, 2021.