

Summary of LBPH Teleconference on Voting
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There are three areas of accessibility that I would like to cover. The first area is accessible polling places and early voting centers. The second area is the accessibility features of the voting system. The last area is election judge training.

Some general information that is helpful to understand voting in Maryland. Each county and Baltimore City, a total of 24, has its own local election board of elections. The State Board of Elections, located in Annapolis, oversees each of the local boards of elections offices.

The State of Maryland has a statewide voter registration system. Each of the local boards is responsible for processing new voter registrations, making changes to existing voter information (change of address, party affiliation, etc.), and processing any absentee ballot requests.

1 – Accessible Polling Places and Early Voting Centers

All early voting centers and most polling places are accessible for voters. If your polling place is not accessible, you can request a new polling place or you can vote by absentee ballot. Call your local board of elections to request a new polling place or an absentee ballot application. You can also apply for an absentee ballot online.

In the upcoming general election, there will be 78 early voting centers across the State, and all 78 early voting centers are accessible. There are nearly 2,000 polling places across the State on election day and some of them are not fully accessible, however they are made accessible with products or methods to make them accessible for election day. For instance, there are four polling places across the State that install a ramp on the day before election day so that the entrance is accessible by voters who may be in a wheelchair or cannot use steps. There is at least one polling place that has a gravel parking lot in which a mat is used for voters with disabilities. There is also a polling place in which the door way

is not wide enough, but the polling place was built before the ADA standards were published and the polling place offers another entrance for voters with disabilities.

The State Board of Elections has a program in which it is required that each of the local board of elections must attempt to provide voting locations that meet State standards for accessibility. When a local board of elections must change a voting location or find a new voting location, it must complete the ADA survey for that new voting location. The ADA survey is mirrored off the federal ADA survey for voting, with additional information that is relevant to elections in the State of Maryland. If it is found that the new voting location is not accessible, then the location cannot be used. However, if the new voting location is not accessible, but can be made accessible with products or methods, then the voting location may be used. All locations used for voting must be evaluated for accessibility.

2 – Accessibility Features of the Voting System

Beginning in 2016, the State of Maryland switched from using the touchscreen voting units to using all paper ballots. Voters will mark their selections onto a paper ballot. Voters with disabilities will have access to a machine called the ballot marking device to provide an accessible voting option. The ballot marking devices allows most voters to mark a ballot without help while keeping their selections private.

There are several ways to mark a ballot using the ballot marking device. Voters can use the touchscreen or keypad. The keypad includes Braille, and both the keypad and headphones are provided so voters can listen to the audio ballot. The ballot marking devices also accommodate sip and puff devices and rocker paddle devices, but those must be supplied by the voter. The ballot marking device also offers high-contrast and enlarged print viewing options for voters with low visibility. If a voter wants to use the ballot marking device, he or she should let the election worker know when the voter checks in to vote. There is no form to complete to use the ballot marking device. If a voter chooses, the touchscreen display can be turned off while a voter is using the audio ballot.

In addition to the audio and visual features of the ballot marking device, written instructions are provided for deaf or hard of hearing voters. If a voter has difficulty reading, the voter can use the audio ballot or have someone help the voter vote the ballot.

Finally, a voter who needs assistance may choose someone to help him or her. If a voter does not bring someone to assist, two election judges of different party affiliations may also assist the voter. Anyone helping a voter may not tell the voter how to vote or try to influence the voter's choice. However, a helper may read the ballot for the voter and assist when marking the ballot. A form called the *Voter Assistance Form* must be completed by anyone assisting a voter.

3 - Election Judge Training

Election judges are the people who are helping the local board of elections run each early voting center and polling place. Chapter 3 of the *Election Judges' Manual* is devoted to informing the election judges on voter assistance and cross-cultural communication. Topics such as voters requesting assistance to vote, completing the *Voter Assistance Form*, voters who are blind or have low vision, voters with physical disabilities, and voters with cognitive disabilities are covered. It is required that every local board of elections train the election judges on the content of this chapter.

In addition to that chapter, there is another chapter devoted to the ballot marking device in which election judges are instructed on how to prepare the ballot marking device for voting and its multiple accessibility features. Election judges are trained that any voter may ask to use the ballot marking device. It does not have to be used only by voters with a disability. The election judges are also trained to not ask the voter why he or she needs or wants to use the ballot marking device and to not ask for proof from the voter why he or she needs to use it. If a voter requests to use the ballot marking device, election judges are trained to offer to explain the accessibility features. The voter may certainly ask to have the features explained. Finally, election judges are trained to ensure that at least two voters use the ballot marking device during the day. If two voters have not used the ballot marking device by 6:00 pm, the election judges are trained to direct voters to use it.

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Absentee Voting Overview Notes: More detailed information can be found on the Absentee Voting pages at elections.maryland.gov

Individuals who wish to vote by absentee ballot must be registered to vote in order to receive a ballot. They can register to vote and apply for an absentee ballot at the same time when they use our online voter registration system. (OLVR). If they are already registered, they can also use OLVR to apply for an absentee ballot, or they can download an absentee ballot application from our website to print, fill out and mail in.

When voters fill out their absentee ballot application, they will be able to choose how they wish to have their ballot delivered to them (by mail or by internet delivery).

On their application, if they choose to have their ballot delivered via internet delivery, about three weeks before the election they will be emailed a link to our Online Ballot Delivery System (OBD) so that they can access their absentee ballot.

The OBD system is compatible with several different screen readers such as JAWS, NVDA, and Windows-Eyes – to name a few. Voters can use OBD to download their blank absentee ballot so they can print it out and mark it by hand. Or, they can use the system's Ballot Marking Tool to mark their selections on the ballot online before they print it out. The system does not save their selections, so as soon as they mark their ballot, they will need to print the ballot right then or their selections will be lost.

Once voters mark their ballot, they will have to mail it in. Voted ballots cannot be sent in by email. If a voter emails in their voted ballot, the ballot will not count, since online voting is not permitted in Maryland.

If someone helps the voter with voting their absentee ballot, they'll need to fill out the *Certification of Person Assisting Absentee Voter* form – which will be included with the absentee ballot documents sent to the voter. A helper can be anyone except a candidate on

the voter's ballot, the voter's employer, an agent of the voter's employer, or an officer or agent of the voter's union.

It is important that voters are aware of the deadlines if they wish to vote by absentee ballot, such as when their absentee ballot application must be received by their local board of elections. You can find the absentee ballot application deadlines and more information about absentee voting on our website at:

<https://elections.maryland.gov/voting/absentee.html>

When a voter mails in his or her voted absentee ballot, it must be post marked on or before election day and received by their local board of elections by 10am on the second Friday after Election Day.

Once a voter has mailed in their absentee ballot, they check on the status of their absentee ballot at our Voter Look-Up site at:

<https://voterservices.elections.maryland.gov/VoterSearch>

For more information about accessible voting in Maryland, you can visit our Access by Voters with Disabilities page:

<https://elections.maryland.gov/voting/accessibility.html>