

**Milwaukee SafeVote Plan**  
**City of Milwaukee Election Commission**  
**Fall 2020 Election Cycle**

**Background**

- Milwaukee is a city of just under 600,000 residents, with approximately 33% or one in three living at or near poverty. African American and Hispanic residents are disproportionately represented in communities in poverty and historically underrepresented in voting, often due to disenfranchisement.
- There are approximately 435,000 eligible voters and 296,000 registered voters in the City of Milwaukee.
- A person must be registered to vote at their current address in order to request an absentee ballot.
- The City presently has 50,281 requests for an absentee ballot in August and 47,505 for November. Of these, 23,603 have identified as indefinitely confined voters which places them permanently on the absentee voting list.
- Wisconsin’s online and by-mail voter registration ends 20 days prior to an election. Registration at “early voting” continues until the Friday preceding the election, and registration may occur at a voting site on Election Day. An average of 20% of Milwaukee’s voters exercise same day registration when voting on Election Day. This percentage can vary significantly within the geography of the city, with areas that have high concentrations of students and people in poverty at the highest end, and economically stable areas at the lower end. Unlike some other states, Wisconsin does not have a mandated registration through the Department of Motor Vehicles (“motor voter”) or automatic registration (automatic voter registration tied to the issuance of licenses or IDs) as seen in absentee by-mail states like Washington and Oregon.
- In 2016, Wisconsin enacted a voting photo ID requirement. A photo ID must be presented each time someone votes in person. Voters must meet a one-time requirement of providing an image of their photo ID when applying for an absentee ballot unless the voter certifies as “indefinitely confined.” Indefinitely confined voters are exempt from the photo ID requirement. On March 31 of this year, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that “indefinitely confined status is for each individual voter to make based upon their current circumstances,” and cannot be applied to a person self-confining.

**Voting Statistics from the April 7 Spring Election**

<b>City of Milwaukee</b>		
<b>April 7, 2020 Voting Statistics</b>		
<b>296,589</b>		<b>Registered Voters</b>
<b>95,168</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>April 7 Turnout</b>
<b>18,806</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>Election Day In-Person Voters</b>
<b>76,362</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>Absentee Voters</b>

<b>Election Day In-Person Voters</b>		
<b>18,806</b>		<b>In-Person Voters</b>
16,174	86%	Registered
2,632	14%	Same Day Registration

**By-Mail Absentee Voting in the April 7 Spring Election**

<b>April 7, 2020 Absentee Voters</b>		
<b>96,712</b>		<b>Absentee Ballots Issued</b>
<b>17,866</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>Not Returned</b>
<b>78,846</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>Returned</b>
1,671	2%	Rejected due to Insufficient Certification
813	1%	Rejected due to Post-April 7 Postmark
76,362	97%	Counted
<b>76,362</b>		<b>Absentee Ballots Counted</b>
11,612	15%	In-Person Absentee ("early") Voting
64,750	85%	By-Mail Absentee Voting

- Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the Milwaukee Election Commission (MEC) received and processed nearly 100,000 requests for absentee ballots in the three weeks preceding the April 7 Spring Election/Presidential Preference.
- This number was unprecedented, with the usual volume of absentee by-mail voters ranging between 8,000 and 10,000. In the two weeks preceding the election, the city would often receive this number of requests in a single day.
- The return rate for absentee ballots was 82%, consistent with the state's average. Of the 17,866 unreturned, over 10,000 were mailed in response to requests received three days prior to the election. It is doubtful these individuals received their ballots in time to return them with an April 7 postmark. Had there been a sufficient return time, the return rate could have been as high as 90%.
- A majority of requests were submitted through MyVote, a voter registration/absentee request website operated by the Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC). There is no method of tracking or available data on how many people attempted but were unable to complete their application process on the MyVote website.

- A third-party group called *The Center for Voting Information* sent a pre-populated absentee ballot application to an expansive list of registered voters in the City of Milwaukee. This mailing elicited a less than marginal number of completed applications.
- Judicial rulings related to the deadlines to request and return absentee ballots were unstable and inconsistent and resulted in widespread confusion and mistrust of the absentee voting process. A court ordered extension on the deadline for requesting an absentee ballot (the Friday preceding the election) remained in effect even though the postmark due date for ballots was later returned to April 7.
- Two weeks prior to the election, Milwaukee opened five drop-box locations (four libraries and the downtown Zeidler Municipal Building) allowing voters to bypass using mail service for returning their ballots. As an upswing in absentee voting was not fully anticipated, initial instructions sent to absentee voters did not reference the availability of the drop-boxes to voters. Approximately 10% - 15% of ballots were returned through the drop-boxes, with a majority being delivered in the days preceding or on the day of the election.

### **Considerations Related to the April 7 Election and Milwaukee's Expansion of By-Mail Voting**

- MyVote is by-far a voter's most efficient mechanism for applying for an absentee ballot. However, access to MyVote requires access to the internet. Many in Milwaukee, particularly seniors and persons with socio-economic challenges, do not have consistent access to the internet. This challenge can be exacerbated when longstanding community resources become unavailable, such as the pandemic-related closing of Milwaukee Public Libraries.
- 1,671 returned absentee ballots were rejected due to insufficient certification, primarily missing witness or voter signatures. Many voters reported an inability to secure a witness signature due to pandemic-related fear and self-isolation.
- Absentee ballots at in-person early voting are not inserted by voters into tabulators, a key mechanism for catching voter errors and providing opportunities for correcting ballots.
- Thousands of absentee ballots had to be reconstructed due to voter errors. In instances of ballot marking errors, votes can be counted if voter intent can be determined. If not, votes are lost. Historically, the department has witnessed a high volume of absentee voters overvoting in the Presidential contest.
- Hundreds of voters submitted absentee applications without photo ID, with some submitting "selfies" instead of actual images of their photo ID. Many, particularly seniors and people in poverty, were unable to navigate the process of taking or uploading an image of their photo ID as part of the absentee application process.
- Due to the closure of most local colleges and universities, the "student vote" in Milwaukee in the April 7 election was almost non-existent.
- The call volume to the department, and ultimately to the Unified Call Center (UCC) was also unprecedented, with thousands calling daily with inquiries related to absentee voting. Estimated wait time for calls often exceeded 30 minutes.

### **Critical Planning Components**

#### **Timing**

The timing of any mailing of absentee information is almost as critical as the mailing itself. A mailing sent in early July (prior to the August Primary) would capture voters for both the Primary and the November General Election. However, it is important to acknowledge that many city residents, particularly within communities in poverty, will likely move between July and the date of the General Election. Additionally, residents may be less attentive to mailings sent during summer months. Ideally, a mailing would be sent prior to both the Primary and the General Election.

### **Cost**

There are numerous costs associated with transitioning voters from in-person voting to by-mail voting. These include mailing/postage costs, supplies, labor to assemble outgoing ballots, labor and equipment to process returned ballots. The estimated cost to the city for this transition would be between \$600,000 and \$800,000. A preliminary perspective of the budget office is that federal Cares Act dollars related to COVID-19 could be used to address these unbudgeted costs. Additionally, dollars may be available through a Cares Act subgrant to be offered by the Wisconsin Elections Commission. Milwaukee may be eligible for a grant of around \$300,000 to cover expenses unique to COVID-19 and election administration.

### **Implementation**

- The plan must include target provisions for reaching communities in poverty, such as community-based options for requesting or returning an absentee ballot.
- Due to the propensity of this population to be more transient and utilize in-person same day registration, the plan must be wed to a voter registration strategy
- Strong partnerships must be forged with local colleges and universities to assist students with updating registrations and voting absentee.
- The UCC 's capacity must be significantly increased to respond to calls on and after any mailing of absentee ballots
- An expanded number of absentee drop-box opportunities
- A multi-faceted public education campaign to provide information and (re)build public trust related to absentee voting
- Absentee application materials should include the following components:
  - A brief explanation of voter registration and absentee voting
  - Clear, visual instructions on how to apply that ideally direct people to MyVote or identified community resources
  - An outline of next steps – mailing of ballots, return due dates, etc.
  - Information on easy-to-access resources for questions

### **SafeVote Model Options**

Various models for by-mail absentee voting, like [Vote at Home strategy plan for 2020](#), are now emerging. These models encourage a multi-modal outreach campaign very much like the one represented in Milwaukee's SaveVote plan.

These models provides voters with the following:

- Expanded options to request a mail-in ballot either online, by phone, by email, or with a physical paper application.

- Institutionalized ballot drop-off locations.
- Comprehensive voter education campaign (run by a state and/or coordinated with nonpartisan voter education efforts organizations). Campaigns specifically:
  - ✓ Advises voters to register to vote well in advance of the election and update their address when required.
  - ✓ Advises voters to ensure their mailing address is current now and at least one month before ballots are mailed.
- Sends a notice to voters on multi-channels (digital) and through USPS.

### **Choosing the Best Model for Milwaukee**

When selecting the appropriate model for encouraging absentee voting in Milwaukee, it is important to review past successes and challenges particularly related to the public's response and compliance with mailed materials. It is also important to note the nuances of Wisconsin's election laws, particularly the state's photo ID requirement and registration requirements. In March, the national *Center for Voting Information* mailed paper absentee ballot applications to approximately 22,500 Milwaukee residents. The mailing included the WEC's uniform absentee voting instructions and a pre-populated absentee application. Of the number mailed, approximately 8,500 (37%) were return-mailed to the MEC by residents. Of that number, only 1,500 (17%) included the required photo ID with their application. This caused significant confusion among voters, who thought they had applied for their ballot, waited, and instead received a communication from the MEC related to the photo ID requirement. There are also considerable back-and-forth return-mail costs associated with this approach, as well as delays that may ultimately infringe on the voter's ability to receive and return their absentee ballot.

The MEC has had similar experiences when the WEC or the *Center for Voter Participation* send voter registration materials to Milwaukee residents. Despite instructions, a substantial (more than 75%) of voters that return the pre-populated form did not include the required proof of residence document.

Additionally, the post office will often forward mailed election materials, including any mailed absentee ballot application. Residents will likely return the received application without registering at their new address. An absentee application can only be processed if the voter is registered at their current address. Finally, an absentee ballot application *only* mailed to the all registered voters does not consider the significant number of Milwaukee residents that are not registered (an estimated 120,000) or need to update their registration (an estimated 60,000).

An alternative approach is to mail Milwaukee households an absentee voting related educational piece that directs people to the MyVote website to submit their applications. This system is user-friendly and effectively guides individuals through the registration process (if necessary) and absentee application process until a confirmation of completion screen appears. This approach increases voter compliance with the absentee application process and provides voters with information and tools to track the status of their request and their ballot.

A primary approach of this plan could be to direct voters to MyVote for all of their voter needs, including updating their address or requesting a ballot. As the WEC makes improvements to MyVote, it will become even more efficient, limiting the effects of staffing shortages and lowering our data entry budget, and enable the Election Commission to process requests within 24 hours or sooner. Of equal importance, it will allow voters to update their address without the challenge of providing proof of

residence. MyVote is a one-stop-shop. Exposing voters early on to MyVote will also allow them to track their ballot when the state transitions to some form of intelligent barcodes. The more familiar Milwaukee residents become with MyVote, the greater the self-sufficiency, trust and confidence in the by-mail absentee voting system. This is a transition not unlike current trends to move toward a “paperless” process of submitting or receiving information. However, as noted earlier in this report, many Milwaukee residents do not have immediate or consistent access to the internet, or the ability to upload an image of their photo ID.

Based on these experiences, it is the recommendation of the MEC that a hybrid of approaches be used to support Milwaukee residents. This model would include in the mailing additional information that would highlight community resources, primarily Milwaukee’s public libraries, to assist any person that does not have access to the internet or who has concerns with navigating the MyVote website. These resources would have readily-available absentee applications and the capacity to make a copy or scan a photo ID.

For individuals without consistent internet access, or the ability to capture an image of their photo ID, the MEC would work with Milwaukee Public Libraries (MPL) to include a level of service that would assist the voter with completing the absentee application process.

- ✓ If libraries are closed, staff could be provided at each library from from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m., seven days a week, to provide assistance. This person would be a TOA or loaned from another department who does not have work at home opportunities (if the libraries are still closed in July, it is safe to assume City workers might be available). The person would need a tablet (to look up registration status on MyVote and possibly enter a registration update if needed), basic copier/printer, and paper applications for absentee and voter registration.
- ✓ If libraries are open, even in limited capacity, the circulation desk would likely be able to make copies of ID and send application via scanning them or assist voters at kiosks to update their address. Election Commission staff could provide signage and training.

Additionally, it is imperative to the success of this campaign for the public to trust their ballot can be returned in time to be counted in an election. Again in partnership with Milwaukee Public Libraries, the MEC is proposing establishing ballot drop-off locations at each library branch for the two weeks preceding each election.

### **Campaign Content, Messaging and Timeline**

The MEC has already secured the support of graphic design staff in the City Clerk’s Office to assist with the development of a one-piece mailer. The vision is for these materials to be informative, instructional, visual, and assuring. Messaging should focus on:

- Easy, secure, private, reliable, trackable
- “No excuse” state, anyone can apply
- Additional guidance on the photo ID requirement, either through MyVote or independently.
- Rebuilding trust in return delivery of ballots by expanded ballot drop-off locations at each library

Materials would be mailed early July and late August.

### **Overhauling Absentee Instructions**

Finally, gauging the success of increased absentee voting process does not begin and end with shifting the public from in-person voting toward absentee voting. Rather, it will be equally important to achieve the highest level of public understanding of each step of the absentee voting process, including marking a ballot, completing the certification section of the return envelope, securing a witness signature and returning a ballot with sufficient time for it to be received by Election Day. It is the intention of the Election Commission to complete a full overhaul of all absentee voting instructions, including developing more visual instructional materials for sending with ballots.

### **A Cohesive Approach to Implementation**

Given Wisconsin's experiences in the April 2020 Spring Election as well as the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is movement in the judicial systems, the Wisconsin Legislature, the WEC, private groups, and within municipalities to move toward increased absentee voting as the safest opportunity to cast a ballot in the fall election cycle.

As one example, the Board of the Wisconsin Elections Commissioners has approved a statewide campaign of mailing applications to registered voters in Wisconsin (excluding those with absentee requests on file and those on the state's "movers list"). This mailing is tentatively scheduled for early September. The MEC's mailings will occur prior to both the August Primary and the November election and will need to be designed to in a way to complement the state's mailing.

Additionally, WEC staff are working with USPS to establish intelligent barcodes on absentee mailing envelopes. Given our proximity to the election, there is no doubt that time is of the essence. However, it is imperative that all processes move forward cohesively in order to avoid the potential for voter confusion.

### **In-Person Voting**

In addition to by-mail absentee voting, Milwaukee's SafeVote plan must also address in-person voting. For a multitude of reasons, including a lack of familiarity or lack of trust, many voters will not be comfortable with a limitation of their voting options to by-mail absentee voting. There must be alternate in-person options for voters. Specifically, the MEC will:

- Convene a task force of members of the Milwaukee Health Department and other departments to again establish best practices for safe in-person voting and to pursue inter-departmental collaborations whenever possible.
- Purchase and provide recommended PPE to all election workers.
- Expand pre-election in-person absentee voting options for the August Primary (three sites, for two weeks prior to the primary) and November General Election (eight sites, with three opening six weeks prior to the election, and an additional five opening three weeks prior).
- Re-establish the department's election workforce (a minimum of 1,000 for August; 2,000 for November) by providing assurances around voting site safety.

- Develop a plan for consolidating polling places to a number that would reduce the demand on election workers, but would not fall below 45 centers citywide, or three voting centers per aldermanic district.

### **SafeVote Summary**

- SafeVote is a plan put forward by Milwaukee elected officials and staff of the Milwaukee Election Commission aimed at providing information and resources for Milwaukee residents to safely vote from home amid the COVID-19 pandemic in the upcoming August and November elections.
- SafeVote calls for two information mailings to all Milwaukee residents (one prior to each election in August and November) that include written and visual information on how to register to vote and request an absentee ballot.
- These mailings would be designed to expand upon and complement the efforts of the Wisconsin Elections Commission to send absentee applications to the state's registered voters
- Residents would be encouraged to utilize the MyVote website to register to vote and then request and track their absentee ballot.
- Libraries would serve as complementary outlets to assist those who want a physical absentee ballot application, don't have access to internet, need help navigating the MyVote website or need assistance scanning a photo ID.
- Additional absentee ballot drop-off sites would be created.
- Additional capacity would be added to the City's Unified Call Center to support incoming questions.
- Revamped educational material around absentee voting would be created.
- Multiple, safe in-person voting opportunities for residents