

The Blog

“Your vote still counts”: General Registrar addresses outdated absentee ballot instructions sent out to voters

Selna Shi, Public Relations Specialist

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On Tuesday morning, Cynthia Johnson, the absentee coordinator received a phone call from a voter. She informed Cynthia that the instructions enclosed in the envelope with her ballot incorrectly indicated the need for a witness signature, a legal requirement that was repealed last year. Upon investigation, our office found that around 25 percent of voters who requested a Democratic ballot for the March Presidential Primary received these incorrect instructions.

Unfortunately, it was not the first time that this has happened to Richmond voters. In September 2023, voters accidentally received outdated instructions. To explain what happened on Tuesday, I need to start from how our office mails out absentee ballots.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, registrar offices all over the state were overwhelmed with mailing out an unprecedented number of absentee ballots. Their offices were understaffed, which meant they worked overtime to manually stuff instructions, ballots, and mailing them out to voters.

The now Richmond General Registrar, Keith Balmer, was working at the Department of Elections and saw how registrars across the state were racing against time.

“There’s a state law that says that you have to send out absentee ballots 45 days before Election Day. Because there were so many absentee ballots requested by people, they [election officials] struggled to reach that goal,” Keith said. “I kid you not, they were working 18 hour days. All of the ballots, all of the inserts, all of the barcodes, all of the instructions, that had to be done by hand.”

Prior to the 2020 election, our office on average sent out 6000 absentee ballots each election. In 2020, the office sent out 17,000 absentee ballots.

A year later, the General Assembly passed Senate Bill 1239, which allowed general registrars to outsource the process of mailing absentee ballots. When Keith was sworn in as the registrar in May 2021, he immediately made sure our office took advantage of the new law and partnered with a third party vendor.

Our office became the first election office in the state to do so. By partnering with a third party vendor, it took weight off the shoulders of election officials and it allowed voters to receive their absentee ballots earlier, even earlier than the first day of Early Voting.

“Now voters get their absentee ballots before Early Voting even starts, it’s wonderful,” Keith said. “Election offices across the state are starting to embrace this [partnering with third party vendors], especially now that we are in another presidential election year.”

The Virginia General Assembly passed House Bill 1948 in February 2023, stating that voters no longer need a witness signature for mail-in voting. The law went into effect in July 2023. In September 2023, our office accidentally sent outdated mail-in instructions to voters who requested absentee ballots.

“That was absolutely our fault,” Keith said.

The mistake in September 2023 affected all absentee voters in Richmond. Our office realized the mistake soon after and sent out postcards to all voters affected, apologizing and explaining the new law that took effect.

Voters that still provided the witness signature on their ballot envelope were not negatively affected. Their votes were still counted.

So what led to the concerned phone call this past Tuesday?

We learned that our vendor kept a box of the same outdated instructions and accidentally sent it out again. Luckily, the mistake did not affect all absentee voters this time.

Our office contacted the vendor and we received a sincere apology from them. The vendor immediately sent out the correct instructions to those affected and will not cost taxpayer money.

“Nothing is wrong with your ballot, it was just the wrong instructions,” Keith said.

If you are a voter who received the outdated instructions, you can still continue to use the ballot and please rest assured that your vote will still be counted.

We also want to apologize to all affected absentee voters. Our common goal with our vendor is to ensure that voters make their voices heard through the democratic process. Our team is here to help and address any issue that a voter is experiencing.

If you have questions or concerns, please call us at 804-646-5950 or email us at absentee@rva.gov.