



SOUTH

A POLICY POSITION REGARDING SECURE ELECTRONIC ABSENTEE BALLOT ACCESS FOR BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED CITIZENS

BACKGROUND

There is no more sacred duty and privilege in the United States than the right to vote; this is especially true for those individuals whose physical or other disabilities prevent or hinder their ability to participate in the democratic process. Nationally, per the National Federation of the Blind, more than 7.2 million individuals eligible to vote are legally blind or visually impaired. Additionally, per a study conducted by the U.S. Elections Access Commission in 2020, 33 percent of individuals with visual impairments chose to vote absentee due to difficulties voting in person. Another 22 percent of voters reported accessibility issues complementing their absentee ballots – with or without assistance.

Additionally, the U.S. Census Bureau has reported a rapid increase in voters choosing to vote absentee or by mail, with nearly half of all voters doing so for the 2020 election. Unfortunately, many citizens who are blind or visually impaired suffer from a lack of access or accommodations creating difficulties for their ability to participate in this constitutional process – particularly when attempting to do so independently vote by absentee ballot. Barriers to participation can lead to citizens being unable or discouraged from expressing this fundamental right.

In response to this need and desire to ensure all citizens retain access to this fundamental right while maintaining a safe and secure elections system, lawmakers in Oklahoma enacted [House Bill 1711 \(2022\)](#) to permit the electronic delivery of ballots and balloting materials to Oklahomans who are legally blind. The bill requires the State Elections Board to establish a system for this electronic delivery utilizing procedures similar to those used by overseas military voters ready for implementation by July 1, 2023. Eligible voters can use their personal computers to privately and independently mark accessible absentee ballots, which are then returned to the respective county election board via the existing absentee ballot process. County boards then process the votes using the same methods for other absentee ballots received. In the South, West Virginia is the only other state to offer online voting access to disabled voters, which it implemented via [Senate Bill 94 \(2020\)](#). Both states' bipartisan efforts demonstrate that this is an achievable goal ensuring citizen access to their fundamental rights while ensuring that voting and elections are protected and secure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council of State Governments Southern Office encourages member states to examine the feasibility of introducing similar legislation to expand access to secure absentee voting for their visually impaired and blind citizens while ensuring the process is safe, secure, and accessible. Legislators can consider the model legislation in Oklahoma ([House Bill 1711 of 2022](#)) and West Virginia ([Senate Bill 94 of 2020](#)) as possible templates for increasing secure electronic access to absentee ballots for visually impaired and blind voters. With the 2024 and future elections likely to see increased voter turnout, our member states must encourage and adopt policies that alleviate barriers that stop disabled citizens from executing their fundamental rights to participate in the democratic process.

The Council of State Governments Southern Office requests that a copy of this policy position be forwarded to its member states' governors, lieutenant governors, secretaries of state, legislative presiding officers, and relevant elections-related committee officers.

Adopted on July 11, 2023, at the 77th Annual Meeting of the Southern Legislative Conference in Charleston, South Carolina