How to vote by mail: A step-by-step guide

This year, more people than ever are choosing to vote by mail or submit early absentee ballots in person, avoiding unnecessary contact in the year of COVID-19.

This year Missouri is allowing voters to request ballots by mail for any reason, rather than needing a specific excuse to vote absentee, said Warren County Clerk Denise Stotler.

However, going through this process for the first time or navigating this year's changes can be a bit confusing. Here's a step-by-step guide for registered voters to vote by mail.

Step 1: Determine if you need a "mail-in" ballot or an "absentee" ballot.

Yes, there is a difference. A mail-in ballot can be requested for any reason, but can only be returned by mail.

An absentee ballot can only be requested if the voter meets certain conditions, but can be filled out in person or returned several different ways.

Qualifying reasons to request an absentee ballot include being absent on Election Day, unable to vote in person because of illness or physical disability (or work as a caregiver for such a person), religious practice, or several other, more narrow reasons, Stotler said.

This year, having contracted COVID-19 or being in an at-risk health category for COVID can also qualify you to vote absentee, Stotler said.

Step 2: Request the ballot

Whether you're requesting a mail-in or absentee ballot, you can download an application from sos.mo.gov or warrencountymoclerk.com. You can also get a form in person at the county clerk's office, 101 Mockingbird Lane, Suite 302, Warrenton.

Mail-in ballots can only be requested in person or by mailing the application, Stotler said. Absentee ballots can be requested in person or by mail, email, fax or online.

Anyone mailing their request for a ballot should send their application soon. Requests for any type of mailed ballot need to be received by the clerk's office by Oct. 21.

Once the application is received, the clerk's office will mail you your ballot (or you can fill out an absentee ballot immediately in person).

Step 3: Get your envelope notarized

Absentee and mail-in ballots will come with a return envelope. Most envelopes require the signature of a notary, who will confirm your identity, in order to be counted. Stotler said only a limited number of people are excepted from this rule.

"Notary is required for all mail-in ballots, and all reasons pertaining to absentee ballots except for (people who are) incapacitated or confined due to illness or at risk for COVID-19," Stotler said.

Stotler advised that most banks have certified notaries on staff. Scenic Regional Library branches also offer free notary services.

Step 4: Return your ballot

All absentee and mail-in ballots need to be returned, in the provided envelope, to the Warren County Clerk's Office by the close of elections Nov. 3.

As stated above, absentee ballots can also be filled out immediately in person at the county clerk's office.

Absentee ballots sent out by mail can by returned to the county clerk's office in person, by mail, or delivered by a close relative, Stotler said.

Mail-in ballots can only be returned by mail.

If you're mailing either ballot type, you should send it as soon as possible to make sure it gets there on time to be counted. Ballots that arrive after Election Day will be too late.

For any other questions about voting by mail, call the Warren County Clerk's office at 636-456-3331.