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The Election Chain of Custody Blueprint:

A Review of the Law, Best Practices, and Messaging Tools

A collaboration between Advance Elections, Verified Voting, and the Election Law Program



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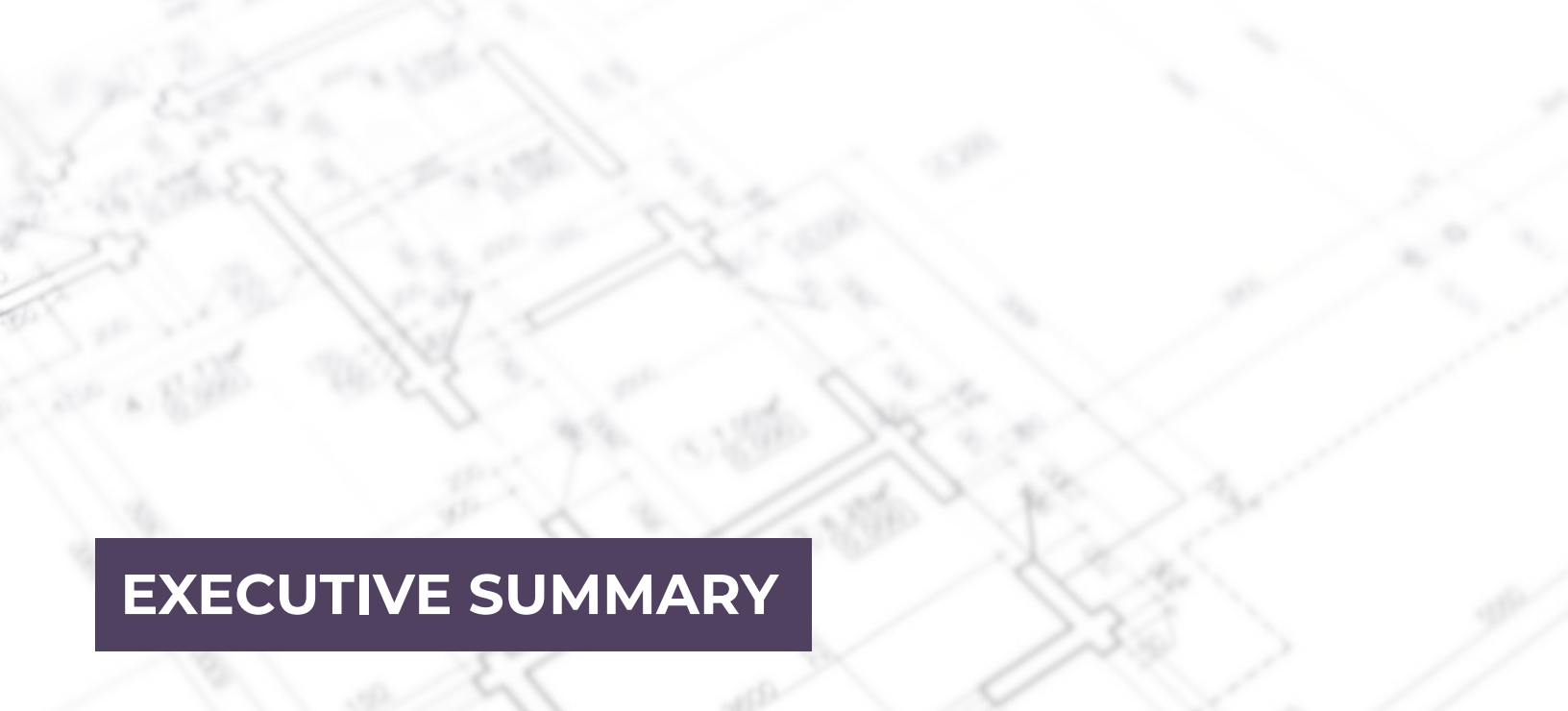
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A faint, stylized map of the United States serves as the background for the top half of the page. The map shows state boundaries and major transportation routes like highways and rivers.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every state and local election jurisdiction in the country is committed to the security of its ballots and the integrity of its elections. The ways states pursue that commitment, however, vary widely, shaped by differences in statute, administrative structure, geography, resources, and history. A practice written into one state's election code may live in another state's procedures manual, and in a third may be a matter of long-standing local policy adopted under delegated authority. That variation is normal. It is not evidence that any jurisdiction is falling short, and readers should resist the temptation to treat differences in approach, or gaps in publicly available documentation, as gaps in security.

At its core, chain of custody is the documented, unbroken record of who had control of every ballot and every piece of voting equipment, from the moment each is created until it is securely archived. It is how election officials turn the work they already do into proof the public can verify.

The offices best positioned for today's scrutiny treat custody as a year-round discipline. They review their systems on a regular schedule, not only after something goes wrong, and they talk about the process in plain language before they are asked to. This report is offered in that spirit. It is not as a standard against which any office should be measured, but as a resource every office can draw from, wherever it is starting. We offer it with great respect for the professionals who do this work every day, and confidence that the story of the election chain of custody in America is one of commitment, care, and continuous improvement.

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

This is a resource for continuous process improvement, not a scorecard or assessment tool. Election offices vary significantly in scale and capacity. We present recommendations in tiers so that any office, regardless of size or budget, can identify realistic, incremental improvements. Offices should use this guide to reflect on their own procedures, validate current strengths, and implement improvements suited to their specific authority and resources.

We welcome tailored training for election offices that want direct support putting these practices into place. Reach out to founders@advanceelections.com.

KEY REPORT SECTIONS

The report is organized into three sections, each corresponding to one of the disciplines that shape how chain of custody works in practice: the law that frames it, the operational practices that carry it out, and the communication that makes it visible to the public. Read together, they move from the rules on the books, to the procedures in the office, to the conversation with voters. This is the same path a ballot's story travels from statute to public trust. Each section stands on its own, so an office can turn to whichever speaks to its most pressing need, but the three are designed to reinforce one another.

- **Part I: The Legal Landscape.** A review of statutory and regulatory frameworks. We emphasize that legislative silence on a specific procedure is not a prohibition; adopting sound custody practices is an exercise of administrative discretion. An appendix provides case law demonstrating the real-world consequences of chain-of-custody breaches.
- **Part II: Best Practices for Election Chain of Custody.** We frame chain of custody as a continuous cycle, not an Election Day checklist. The framework rests on five foundational standards: continuous logging, multi-person execution, least-privilege access, verified signatures, and independent reconciliation. It offers a “good/better/best” approach to scale controls to an office’s capacity.
- **Part III: Communications and Public Messaging.** This section helps officials build transparency. We provide principles for incident response, scenario-specific guidance, the rationale for publishing annual after-action reports, and a voter-ready toolkit that election officials can use. Communicated proactively and factually, a process gap isn’t a scandal but evidence the safeguards caught exactly what they were built to catch.



A PARTNERSHIP BUILT FOR A 360° VIEW

This report is the product of a unique collaboration among three organizations, each contributing a distinct pillar of expertise: the Election Law Program, which conducted the legal research surveying the statutes, regulations, and case law that govern chain of custody across the states; Advance Elections, which developed the best practices framework drawing on the operational experience of election administrators; and Verified Voting, which built the communications guidance for bringing the public into the process. Together, these three pillars provide something none could alone: a comprehensive, 360° view of election chain of custody as it exists today in law, in practice, and in the public domain.

About the Organizations

Advance Elections

[Advance Elections](#) is a nonpartisan, mission-driven consulting firm. With over 40 years of combined experience in elections and public service, Advance Elections is dedicated to strengthening the infrastructure, resilience, and trust that underpin American elections.

Verified Voting

[Verified Voting](#) is a nonpartisan nonprofit whose mission is to strengthen democracy for all voters by promoting the responsible use of technology in elections. Verified Voting works with election officials, policymakers, and democracy defenders across party lines to help voters vote and to promote policies that support justified public confidence in elections.

The Election Law Program

[The Election Law Program](#) (ELP) is a nonpartisan organization created as a joint venture of the National Center for State Courts and William & Mary Law School to provide practical assistance to state court judges called upon to resolve difficult election law disputes. The ELP seeks to illuminate and clarify the intersection of the law and elections, working to bridge the knowledge gap between election officials, practitioners, and the judges that oversee election litigation.

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PART I: THE LEGAL LANDSCAPE

This section contains a descriptive review of state statutes, regulations, and administrative frameworks governing chain of custody practices. It is intended to identify common legal approaches, highlight notable variations among states, and provide examples for election officials and policymakers considering updates to their own statutory and regulatory frameworks. It is not an assessment of any state's electoral code or election administration practices. States implement chain of custody requirements through differing combinations of statutes, regulations, administrative procedures, and local practices.

1 | NOTES ON APPROACH

The administration of elections is conducted differently in every state, with some states carving out distinct approaches to election administration for different localities *within* their state. Consequently, this report includes the normative measures and practices that are used across state electoral systems, noting differences and trends in application and terminology when applicable. States create their chain of custody frameworks in a variety of ways: some lay out custody practices in their statutes comprehensively, others set standards in statute and reserve granular detail for regulations, while other states delegate the specifics to the chief elections official or entity, at the local or state-level. Relatedly, a chief local elections official may be required to submit their specific custody plan to the secretary of state's office for approval or a state statute may require the state election board to promulgate processes in official manuals. This section contains excerpts from state laws to provide a more thorough and helpful resource; all approaches are different means to the same end, and the requirements in each example could be implemented as statutes, regulations, or within official manuals.

Within state codes, some consolidate most or all chain of custody processes into one or two sections. All of Arkansas' custody provisions for transporting absentee and provisional ballots, for example, are contained within a single statute,¹ and Colorado details custody processes and security measures for all materials throughout the election in one,² as does Utah.³ Most states, however, divide up the instructions and aspects of custody across their code, specifying practices and legal custodians at each stage of the election in separate code sections.⁴ This section organizes discussion and examples of state code sections into broader categories for clarity as well as brevity.

¹ [Ark. Code Ann. § 7-5-617](#).

² [Colo. Code Regs. § 1505-1-20](#).

³ [Utah Code Ann. § 20A-3a-401.1](#).

⁴ See e.g., Virginia's code has a statute with broad custody measures for delivering ballots from the printing vendor to the county registrar ([Va. Code Ann. § 24.2-617](#)), a statute with instructions on proper sealing of ballot packages for delivery to polling places by the registrar ([Va. Code Ann. § 24.2-619](#)), instructions for delivery to and receipt by polling place officers ([Va. Code Ann. § 24.2-620, 621](#)), as well as custody measures for delivering statute on custody measures during post-canvass transport ([Va. Code Ann. § 24.2-668](#)).

Similarly, the actual links in the chain of custody differ naturally with variations in election conduct and administrative structure from state-to-state. From pre-election preparation to post-election storage, the number, titles, and roles of persons or entities who will have legal custody of election materials at some point in the process varies widely. Terminology use throughout this report is defined in the Glossary of Terms contained in Part II.

For each phase of the election cycle, this overview provides analysis of the statutory and regulatory frameworks across the country. Major trends are identified with citations to relevant statutes and regulations, and then instructive examples of state statutes and regulations follow. Where states use substantively different approaches, multiple examples are highlighted.

2 | TRANSFERS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Election materials are transferred at multiple points throughout the election cycle, including distribution, voting, tabulation, storage, and destruction.
- States use different custodial structures, but nearly all require documentation when custody changes hands.
- Bipartisan handling, sealed containers, and transfer receipts are among the most common transfer safeguards.
- Transfer requirements tend to become more detailed when ballots have been cast but not yet counted.

Election materials are transferred throughout the election cycle. This includes transfers during the distribution of election materials to polling places, during the voting period, during the count, during post-election processes like recounts, and transfers for final storage and destruction of election materials. Each transfer of material introduces risk of improper access to materials and states employ multiple strategies to address these risks. Many of the core principles and practices are similar regardless of when the election materials are transferred.

Transfers During Distribution

The first link in the chain of custody is forged when election materials are distributed, first to a central location or directly to the polling place. Paper ballots, for example, are often transported from the printing vendor to a central location and subsequently distributed to polling places from the central location via delivery;⁵ in rarer instances, printed ballots for each polling place are picked up at a central location⁶ or mailed directly to polling places.⁷ The number of links in the chain of custody differ state-to-state and depend on the nature of the material being transferred. South Carolina's State Election Commission has custody from printing to distribution to county boards,

⁵ See *id.*

⁶ See e.g., [W. Va. Code § 3-1-24](#).

⁷ See, e.g., Arizona's statute below in Example of a Transfer of Ballots.

who then maintain custody until ballots are distributed to polling places.⁸ County election boards in Pennsylvania have custody during printing and distribution (see Pennsylvania's statute in the second example below). County elections officials in South Dakota transfer materials and custody to the chief poll worker at each polling place.⁹ The same is true for voting and tabulation machines: the official or entity with custody between elections transfers the machines for use in the election, either directly to polling places¹⁰ or via transfer to a second location and second custodian for distribution.¹¹ Similar variations exist across states during and after the voting period, as well as after all election activities cease and materials are transported into storage.

EXAMPLE OF A TRANSFER OF BALLOTS (ARIZONA):

[ARIZ. REV. STAT. § 16-509](#)

The board of supervisors, city or town clerk or governing body of a special district shall deliver, by mail or other reliable method, to each voting precinct or to the inspector of each election board...one package containing the required number of ballots, at least forty-eight hours before the hour for opening the polls on election day, unless prevented by some unavoidable delay or accident which shall be established by affidavit of election officers or bearers of ballots. The official ballots shall be sent in sealed packages with marks on the outside of the package clearly designating the polling place for which they are intended and the number of ballots enclosed. Upon delivery of the package to him, the inspector shall return receipts therefor to the person from whom received.

SECOND EXAMPLE OF A TRANSFER OF BALLOTS (PENNSYLVANIA):

[25 PA. CONS. STAT. § 3044](#)

The...forms and supplies required for use in each election district, and also the district register of such district, and...the official and specimen ballots prepared for use therein, shall be packed by the county board of elections in separate sealed packages for each election district, marked on the outside so as to clearly designate the districts for which they are intended, and, in the case of districts in which ballots are used, the number of ballots of each kind enclosed. They shall then be delivered by the county board...to the judges of election in the several election districts, not later than the day prior to the day of the primary or election.... The respective judges of election or inspectors shall, on delivery to them of such packages, return receipts therefor to the county board, which shall keep a record of the time when and the manner in which the several packages are delivered. The county board may, in its discretion, require the respective judges of election to call at its office to obtain the said packages.

Transfers During the Voting Period

During voting, whether on Election Day or during a state's early voting period, officials may need to refresh the supply of unvoted ballots to fill unexpected gaps in ballot quantities,¹² replace faulty voting machines,¹³ collect

⁸ [S.C. Code Ann. § 7-13-340](#).

⁹ [S.D. Codified Laws § 12-16-18](#).

¹⁰ See e.g., [Wyo. Stat. Ann. § 22-10-107](#); [Wyo. Stat. Ann. § 22-10-111](#)

¹¹ See e.g., [Nev. Rev. Stat. § 293B.340](#).

¹² See e.g., [Iowa Code § 49.66](#).

¹³ See e.g., [La. Stat. Ann. § 18:1363](#).

ballots cast at drop boxes or at similar deposit sites,¹⁴ or transport ballots to be counted while early voting is ongoing.¹⁵ Absentee ballots returned at a drop box or by mail are securely collected and transferred in largely the same manner as voted paper ballots, whether they are taken to a central location for storage or directly to the

tabulation site.¹⁶ Errors in transferring cast but not yet counted ballots come with significant risk, therefore statutory frameworks for these transfers are often prescriptive.¹⁷ The election official directly receiving mailed absentee ballots will become the legal custodian upon receipt, whether a state allows tabulation of ballots when received or requires secure storage of mailed ballots until the count begins.¹⁸

EXAMPLE OF A TRANSFER FROM A DRIVE-UP CONTAINER (VERMONT):

[Vt. Stat. Ann. tit. 17., § 2502](#)

(d) Ballot transfer. If a polling place is outside or if voting is conducted by a drive-up method, ballots may be periodically transferred from a secure outdoor or drive-up ballot box to another secure container for counting after the close of the polls or to election officials who are processing ballots through the tabulator. Any such transfer shall be done in the presence of two election officials, if possible officials of different parties.

EXAMPLE OF A TRANSFER FROM AN EARLY VOTING BALLOT BOX (WASHINGTON):

[Wash. Admin. Code § 434-250-100](#)

(c) A team of two removes the ballots from the [ballot drop] box and verifies the seal and log. The county auditor shall remove the deposited ballots and transport them to the counting center by either: (i) Two employees of or two persons appointed by the county auditor; or (ii) Secured transport carrier containing ballots removed and sealed by two employees of or two persons appointed by the county auditor.

EXAMPLE OF A TRANSFER FROM AN EARLY VOTING BALLOT BOX (KENTUCKY):

[KY. REV. STAT. ANN. § 117.086](#)

(f) Each receptacle or drop-box shall be emptied by the county clerk and at least one (1) member of the county board of elections or one (1) member of the central ballot counting board if one is appointed, who is not of the same political affiliation as the county clerk at least once each business day or more frequently, as needed, to reasonably secure and accommodate the volume of the voter-delivered mail-in absentee ballots. The ballots deposited in the drop-box or receptacle shall be removed with a record of the date and time ballots were removed, and the names of the persons removing them. If the drop-box

¹⁴ See, e.g., Vermont's statute below in Example of a Transfer from a Drive-Up Container.

¹⁵ See e.g., [Nev. Admin. Code § 293.250](#).

¹⁶ See e.g., [Mo. Rev. Stat. § 115.655](#).

¹⁷ Whether state code is highly prescriptive or heavily delegates rulemaking, state codes typically provide local officials with some amount of authority to adjust custody processes. Delegated authority like this allows officials to respond to issues with new or improved procedures: for example, after a county elections office in California discovered that ballots had been left uncounted in a drop box, the county office examined their custody processes and documentation, and implemented a new “lock out, tag out” process to prevent the same issue occurring in the future. See Clara Harter, California county discovers trove of unopened ballots from last election in a locked box, Los Angeles Times (May 6, 2026, 7 PM), <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2026-05-06/california-county-discovers-trove-of-unopened-ballots-in-locked-box>.

¹⁸ See e.g., [Fla. Stat. § 101.67](#).

or receptacle is located outside the county clerk's office, the ballots shall be returned to the county clerk in locked transport containers, and the county clerk shall transfer the ballots upon receipt in accordance with subsection (3) of this section.

Transportation for Central Tabulation

When polling places close on Election Day (or at the end of each day of early voting, if the state provides for it), states that require or allow for central counting locations must transport election materials from each polling place to the central counting location.¹⁹ Similar to transfers during voting periods, rules regarding the transfer of cast but not yet counted ballots are typically detailed.

EXAMPLE OF A TRANSFER TO A CENTRAL COUNTING STATION (ILLINOIS):

10 ILCS 5/24A-10,

The judges of election thereupon immediately shall securely lock the ballot box or other suitable box furnished for return of the ballots by the election official in charge of the election; provided that if such box is not of a type which may be securely locked, such box shall be sealed with filament tape provided for such purpose which shall be wrapped around the box lengthwise and crosswise, at least twice each way. A separate adhesive seal label signed by each of the judges of election of the precinct shall be affixed to the box so as to cover any slot therein and to identify the box of the precinct; and if such box is sealed with filament tape as provided herein rather than locked, such tape shall be wrapped around the box as provided herein, but in such manner that the separate adhesive seal label affixed to the box and signed by the judges may not be removed without breaking the filament tape and disturbing the signature of the judges. Thereupon, 2 of the judges of election, of different major political parties, forthwith shall by the most direct route transport the box for return of the ballots and enclosed ballots and returns to the central counting location designated by the election official in charge of the election.

EXAMPLE OF TRANSFER REQUIRING SUPERVISION BY LAW ENFORCEMENT (INDIANA):

IND. CODE § 3-12-3-2.5

(d) Whenever the precinct returns are made directly to the office of the clerk of the circuit court and the counting location is not performed in that office, the county election board is responsible for arranging adequate security during the transfer of all ballot cards to the counting location. This security shall include the following:

- (1) All ballot cards must at all times be under the supervision of at least two (2) persons, one (1) from each of two (2) political parties entitled to have a member on the county election board.
- (2) At least one (1) member of the county sheriff's department shall accompany the ballot cards from the clerk's office to the counting location.

¹⁹ See e.g., [Ark. Code Ann. § 7-5-614](#); [Neb. Rev. Stat. § 32-1049](#); [S.D. Codified Laws § 12-17B-9](#); [Wis. Stat. § 5.86](#).

Transfers for Post-Election Storage and Destruction

All states transport election materials into secure storage to be retained for post-election processes like recounts, contests, and audits for a time period set by statute.²⁰ Custody for storage is generally transferred back to the official or entity responsible for initial ballot preparation and distribution.²¹

EXAMPLE OF A TRANSFER FOR LONG TERM STORAGE (MISSISSIPPI):

[MISS. CODE ANN. § 23-15-911](#)

[T]he box shall be forthwith resealed and delivered to the circuit clerk, who shall safely keep and secure the same against any tampering.

Transferring election materials is a logistically complex, time-constrained process, and state approaches all function to reduce the opportunity for and consequences for any mistakes or improper actions.

3 | SECURE STORAGE AND ACCESS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- States employ a wide range of approaches to storing election materials, from bank vaults and warehouses to courthouses and election offices.
- When materials are at the polling place or voting center, all states require a secure storage area and access restrictions in some form.
- Retention periods and custodians vary by jurisdiction, but all states restrict access to election materials post-election, allowing only authorized activities such as audits, recounts, and contests.
- Storage requirements frequently focus on limiting access, maintaining documentation, and preserving materials for future review.

State codes can prescribe exact locations,²² distance limits in miles,²³ and precise temperature and humidity ranges for storing election materials.²⁴ Between elections and during pre-election preparation, containers and materials

²⁰ See e.g., [17 R.I. Gen. Laws § 17-19-39.1](#).

²¹ See e.g., [Me. Stat. tit. 21-A, § 698](#) ("The [polling place] warden shall deliver the ballots and lists to the [county] clerk immediately upon conclusion of the ballot count."), [N.M. Stat. Ann. § 1-13-22](#) ("After the election, the county clerk shall have custody of the voting machines."); [Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-911](#) (When the returns for a box and the contents of the ballot box and the conduct of the election have been canvassed and reviewed by the county election commission...box shall be forthwith resealed and delivered to the circuit clerk, who shall safely keep and secure the same against any tampering."); [Va. Code Ann. § 24.2-669](#) ("The [circuit court] clerk to whom the counted and uncounted ballots are delivered shall, without breaking the seal, deposit them in a secure place in his office, where they shall be kept for the time required by this section.").

²² [25 Pa. Cons. Stat. § 2095](#).

²³ [Ariz. Rev. Stat. § 16-608](#).

²⁴ [Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 20662](#).

may be stored in bank vaults,²⁵ warehouses,²⁶ a room or safe in government offices or the local courthouse,²⁷ or on-site at a polling place.²⁸ Despite differences in prescriptiveness and approach, after election materials are transferred to the polling place, all state codes ultimately require that the legal custodian on site secure the materials in an area with controlled access whenever materials are not actively in use (including received absentee ballots).²⁹ This can be drafted in state code by requiring officials to store materials in a designated area that is off-limits to the public,³⁰ or byprescribing a set of requirements for the secure area (often a locked room or safe).³¹ Controlled access in state code *can* require the use of an access log whenever election materials are stored, but this is not the majority of states. Most state codes leave the exact location and security methods for storage up to local election officials or entities, including how access is controlled and recorded.³²

EXAMPLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTIONS (PENNSYLVANIA):

25 PA. CONS. STAT. § 2095

The commissioners for the city of Philadelphia shall provide a fireproof room or vault...at which the judge of the elections, after the closing of the polls, and the requirements of the law have been complied with, shall forthwith there deliver to the mayor and recorder of the city of Philadelphia the said ballot boxes.

EXAMPLE RESTRICTING ACCESS TO ELECTION MATERIALS (KANSAS):

KAN. ADMIN. REGS. § 7-21-1

When voting equipment is delivered to polling places for use on election day, the voting equipment shall be secured with access limited to authorized personnel from the time the equipment leaves the storage facility until its return

After tabulation is complete and materials are repackaged and sealed, the next concern is maintaining the chain of custody if materials are reviewed by a court, campaign, state entity, or other person due to a post-election process such as a recount, contest, or audit. At this stage, election materials are transferred into storage, and custody is transferred from the officials or entity conducting the count to another legal custodian. While the custodian is often the chief local election official, such as the county clerk, several states allow or require storage at the county courthouse while recounts or contests can still be brought.³³ During post-election processes like recounts or contests, states generally handle requested materials in one of two ways: the original custodian retains custody and monitors their use,³⁴ or custody is transferred to the court or entity overseeing the dispute.³⁵ In all cases, the custodian is only allowed to release election materials based on a court order or statutory duty, to monitor the materials throughout the process, and to log all access to the materials.³⁶

²⁵ [Vt. Stat. Ann. tit. 17, § 2590.](#)

²⁶ [La. Stat. Ann. § 18:1376.](#)

²⁷ [Wis. Stat. § 7.21.](#)

²⁸ [Kan. Stat. Ann. § 25-4408.](#)

²⁹ See e.g., [Ga. Code Ann. § 21-2-386\(a\)\(1\)\(B\).](#)

³⁰ See e.g., [Kan. Admin. Regs. § 7-21-1](#); [Md. Code Regs. 33.16.04.01.](#)

³¹ See e.g., [N.H. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 656:42](#); [Tex. Elec. Code Ann. § 85.071](#); [W. Va. Code § 3-4A-13.](#)

³² See e.g., [Fla. Admin. Code Ann. r. 1-15-2.015\(5\)\(p\)](#); [Tenn. Code Ann. § 2-6-104\(c\).](#)

³³ See e.g., [Ark. Code Ann. § 7-5-702\(a\)](#); [N.M. Stat. Ann. § 1-14-9\(A\)](#); [Va. Code Ann. § 24.2-659\(A\)](#); [Wis. Stat. § 7.21\(5\).](#)

³⁴ See e.g., [Kan. Stat. Ann. § 25-1447](#); [N.M. Stat. Ann. § 1-14-9](#); [Tex. Elec. Code Ann. § 213.001.](#)

³⁵ See e.g., [Ark. Code Ann. § 7-5-702\(c\)](#); [31 Ky. Admin. Regs. 4:201](#); [Nev. Rev. Stat. § 293.480.](#)

³⁶ See e.g., [Va. Code Ann. § 24.2-659](#); [Wash. Rev. Code § 29A.60.110.](#)

EXAMPLE OF CUSTODY DURING CONTESTS AND RECOUNTS (NEW MEXICO):

[N.M. STAT. ANN. § 1-14-9](#)

Ballots shall be impounded in the county courthouse or secured in the county clerk's office [during contests or recounts]. When impounded ballots are being handled, a county clerk or the clerk's agent shall be present to ensure that all documents are properly catalogued and returned in proper order.

ALTERNATIVE EXAMPLE OF CUSTODY DURING CONTESTS AND RECOUNTS (KENTUCKY):

[31 KY. ADMIN. REGS. 4:201](#)

If a board is established...to try a contested election...the possession of all components of a voting system, ballots, ballot boxes, precinct rosters, and any other voting records sent for by the board shall not transfer unless the transfer is: (1) Documented in writing on Form SBE 75, Election Contest Chain-of-Custody; and (2) In compliance with the directions on the form.

After post-election processes are complete or the window to request materials has closed, election materials are then transferred into long-term storage. In many states, officials store state election materials for a shorter period than federal election materials, but some states make no distinction and simply store all election materials for the same length of time (often 22 months) before destroying them.³⁷

EXAMPLE OF TERM OF STORAGE (MARYLAND):

[MD. CODE REGS. 33.07.10.02](#)

All voted ballots shall remain in a sealed ballot box until they are authorized to be opened and removed for an audit, recount, judicial challenge, storage, or disposal. [and] retained for at least 22 months after the election.

4 | ELECTION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Election Management Systems are critical election infrastructure, supporting election setup, ballot creation, vote tabulation, results reporting, and audit trail maintenance throughout the election cycle, though states vary in how they define and regulate them.
- Security controls commonly include audit logging and monitoring, requiring EMS activity to be recorded in real time with timestamps, and network isolation.
- States protect EMS through legal enforcement, imposing criminal penalties for unauthorized access, tampering, or interference with election systems.

³⁷ See e.g., [Fla. Stat. § 101.545](#); [Md. Code Regs. 33.07.10.02](#); [Va. Code Ann. § 24.2-669](#).

Election management systems (EMS) occupy a unique position in the chain of custody because of their use throughout the election administration cycle. While state variations in scope and terminology persist, an EMS is, in general, the “[s]et of processing functions and databases within a voting system that defines, develops and maintains election databases, performs election definitions and setup functions, format ballots, count votes, consolidates and report results, and maintains audit trails.”³⁸ Definitions in state code can mirror this language closely, but many states opt to include a brief mention of EMS as an aspect of a defined “voting system” instead.³⁹ A unified EMS can be utilized statewide,⁴⁰ but discretion is often given to the chief local elections official or entity to choose and implement their own EMS.⁴¹ Many of the access restrictions, credentialing requirements, audit logs, and monitoring controls discussed operationally in Part II are designed specifically to protect these systems and the software they manage. It should be noted that, in contrast to many aspects of custody discussed in this report, many states do not lay out explicit EMS custody provisions or security requirements in their code; state code may mention the EMS only in the context of codified criminal penalties for improper access to the system, with more prescriptive requirements preserved in official state documents (i.e., manuals or guides).⁴²

Similar to other aspects of custody and security during elections, physical and electronic access to the EMS is limited to persons authorized by the chief elections authority, often at the local level.⁴³ States limit electronic access to the EMS to authorized users with individual, password-protected accounts,⁴⁴ with some providing granular requirements like Iowa, which sets in their regulatory code the threshold number of failed logins before an account is locked,⁴⁵ and Colorado, which sets a numerical limit on accounts with administrative access.⁴⁶

38 ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMM’N, GLOSSARY OF ELECTION TERMINOLOGY (July 21, 2021), https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/glossary_files/Glossary_of_Election_Terms_EAC.pdf.

39 Compare [Del. Code Ann. tit. 15, § 101\(8\)](#) (“Election Management System” refers to the computer programs and databases managed by the State Election Commissioner and used by the State Election Commissioner and the Department of Elections to maintain voter registration records, to manage absentee voting, maintain election officer information, maintain polling place information, structure elections and for other purposes.”) and [Fla. Admin. Code Ann. r. 1-1S-2.015\(2\)\(f\)](#) (“Election management system” means those components of a voting system that defines, develops, and maintains election databases, performs election definitions and setup functions, formats ballots, acquires the tabulation results, consolidates the aggregate election results, produces report results, and maintains its audit trails.”) with [Md. Code Regs. 33.09.01.01](#) (“Voting system” includes any model or version of: (i) A voting system; (ii) A voting machine, voting device, tabulating equipment, vote-counting program, or other equipment, hardware, firmware, or software used by or with a voting system; (iii) Election management software or hardware used by or with a voting system; and (iv) Any other component of a voting system.”).

40 See e.g., [Del. Code Ann. tit. 15, § 101\(8\)](#) (“Election Management System” refers to the computer programs and databases managed by the State Election Commissioner and used by the State Election Commissioner and the Department of Elections...”).

41 See e.g., [Fla. Admin. Code Ann. r. 1-1S-2.015\(5\)\(d\)](#) (“The supervisor of elections shall file with the Division of Elections a copy of the information used within the election management system to define the tabulation and reporting instructions for each election regardless of filings for prior elections.”).

42 See e.g., [Okla. Stat. tit. 26, § 16-124](#) (“Any person who intentionally accesses or attempts to access without authorization, tampers with or attempts to tamper with, or damages or attempts to damage...any part of an election management system...shall be deemed guilty of a felony.”); [Wash. Rev. Code § 29A.84.555](#) (“Any person who willfully and without authority accesses or assists another person or entity with unauthorized access to...any election system...whether electronic or physical access, is guilty of a class C felony...”). A high-profile case of improper access to part of the election management system occurred in Mesa County, CO in 2021 when then-county clerk Tina Peters used the access credentials of a systems technician to bring an unauthorized person into the secure storage area, see Megan Varlee, The Mesa County Clerk Tina Peters’ election security controversy, explained, COLO. PUB. RADIO (Feb 14, 2022, 2:13pm), <https://www.cpr.org/2022/02/14/mesa-county-clerk-tina-peters-election-controversy-explained/>.

43 See e.g., [Iowa Admin. Code r. 721-22.50\(1\)](#) (“The [written] security policy [of each county] shall describe who shall have access to the voting equipment, including the computers used in the commissioner’s office to prepare ballots and voting equipment programs or to compile election results.”).

44 See e.g., [N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. Tit. 9, § 6210.11\(c\)](#).

45 [Iowa Admin. Code r. 721-22.50\(2\)\(b\)](#).

46 [Colo. Code Regs. § 1505-1-20.5.2\(c\)\(7\)](#) (“The county clerk may grant administrative privileges to no more than four individual user accounts per election unless the county clerk has requested and been authorized by the Secretary of State to grant more.”).

EXAMPLE OF EMS ELECTRONIC ACCESS (FLORIDA):

Fla. Admin. Code Ann. r. 1-15-2.015(n)

(n) Electronic access to voting systems. Security procedures shall identify all methods of electronic access to the vote tabulation system including on Election Day and daily during the early voting period. The procedures for authorizing electronic access and specific functions, and specifying methods for detecting, controlling and reporting access to the vote tabulation system shall be identified, and shall additionally include:

1. A document that defines the procedure that ensures that default or vendor supplied passwords, encryption keys, or other identifier have been changed. This activity must ensure that:

a. Access control keys/passwords are maintained in a secured and controlled environment. The individual(s) with access to these items must be delineated.

b. Changes to the encryption keys and passwords are at the discretion of the supervisor of elections. This discretionary authority should not be delegated. The individual(s) that implement a change to the encryption keys and/or passwords must have this "authorization to change" responsibility.

Commonly, states require election management systems to document access, activity, and other “events” in the EMS in a real-time audit log.⁴⁷ To ensure that the EMS stays secure during the election, states can require that the management system stay distinct and separate from outside or otherwise unsecure networks.⁴⁸ This security measure is commonly referred to as an “air-gapped” system, and can apply to the voting system as a whole or to the EMS in particular.⁴⁹

EXAMPLE OF A REAL-TIME AUDIT LOG REQUIREMENT (TEXAS):

1 TEX. ADMIN. CODE § 81.62

(a) For any Election Management System's central accumulator to be certified for use in Texas elections, the central accumulator shall include a real-time audit log. All significant election events and their date and time stamps shall be maintained in the audit log.

(b) The definition of "significant election events" in subsection (a) of this rule includes but is not limited to: (1) error and/or warning messages and operator response to those messages; (2) number of ballots read for a given precinct; (3) completion of reading ballots for a given precinct; (4) identity of the input ports used for modem transfers from precincts; (5) users logging in and out from election system; (6) precincts being zeroed; (7) reports being generated; (8) diagnostics of any type being run; and (9) change to printer status.

⁴⁷ See e.g., [1 Tex. Admin. Code § 81.62\(a\)](#) ("For any Election Management System's central accumulator to be certified for use in Texas elections, the central accumulator shall include a real-time audit log. All significant election events and their date and time stamps shall be maintained in the audit log.").

⁴⁸ See e.g., [Wash. Rev. Code § 29A.12.210](#).

⁴⁹ See e.g., [Mo. Rev. Stat. § 115.013](#) ("['[A]ir-gapped', a security measure in which equipment is physically and technically isolated from any network and is not directly connected to the internet nor is it connected to any other system that is connected to the internet. Data can only be passed to an air-gapped device physically via a USB or other removable media"]")

5 | SECURITY MEASURES AND CUSTODY DOCUMENTATION

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Documentation is a foundational mechanism used to demonstrate that election materials remained secure throughout the election process.
- States commonly require chain of custody logs, inventory records, receipts, seals, incident reports, and other accountability measures.
- Bipartisan oversight is one of the most widely used chain of custody safeguards across election stages.
- Individual states implement these controls differently, but they generally seek to answer the same questions: who had custody, when, where, and why.

While storage requirements govern where election materials are held, states also rely on documentation and security controls to record who has access to those materials and when custody changes occur. These procedures often apply across every stage of the election cycle and form the backbone of chain of custody requirements.⁵⁰

Despite the differences between state election frameworks, there are key security measures and documentation processes that most states follow whenever custody is transferred or stored: chain of custody logs, seals, receipts, inventory logs, access logs, incident reports, and reconciliation. An emphasis on two or more bipartisan custodians and witnesses is common at every stage of an election and is a theme throughout the chain of custody requirements. For as important as bipartisan representation and oversight is during elections, state codes can include the condition “if possible” to account for unexpected events or personnel limitations.⁵¹ To curb delays during the physical transportation of election materials, state codes may require that custodians take the most direct route to their destination and prohibit any stops between the starting point and destination.⁵² Impedances during transfer can lead to delays in election processes or questions about the chain of custody. While the security measures and custody documentation that follow are primarily utilized or created when materials are transferred and stored, they are implicated throughout election processes and will be mentioned later or discussed further in this report accordingly.

⁵⁰ The measures and documentation discussed throughout this report provide multiple safeguards against errors or issues, each procedure acting as a failsafe in support of the others: for example, while a tabulation machine in Milwaukee was not properly sealed prior to use, an election observer noticed the issue and reported it to officials, who then used the real-time audit log in the tabulation machine to check if there was any tampering before resetting every tabulation machine in the facility and retabulating ballots. Evan Casey, Sealing error on vote tabulation machines leads to delay in Milwaukee, WIS. PUB. RADIO (Nov. 5, 2024, 10:07 PM), <https://www.wpr.org/news/sealing-error-vote-tabulation-machines-delay-milwaukee-election-2024>.

⁵¹ See e.g., [Vt. Stat. Ann. tit. 17, § 2502\(d\)](#).

⁵² See e.g., [10 Ill. Comp. Stat. 5/24A-10](#); [Minn. Stat. § 206.86\(2\)](#); [N.J. Rev. Stat. § 19:18-2](#).

EXAMPLE OF BIPARTISAN SUPERVISION (WISCONSIN):

WIS. STAT. § 5.85

[T]he municipal clerk or 2 of the election officials shall forthwith and by the most direct route transport the container and envelopes.... Unless election officials are selected...without regard to party affiliation, the election officials shall consist in each case of at least one election official of each of the 2 major political parties, whenever officials of both parties are present.

EXAMPLE OF A DIRECT ROUTE REQUIREMENT (SOUTH DAKOTA):

S.D. CODIFIED LAWS § 12-17B-9

[T]wo of the members of the precinct election board, of different major political parties, shall, by the most direct route, transport the box to the central counting location....

Chain of Custody Log

A chain of custody log tracks and records the transfer of election materials, capturing where the materials originated, where they were delivered, why they were transferred, and who had custody along the way.⁵³ The chain of custody log may be referred to as a transmittal log, transfer log, transfer or transport document, or documentary record. While some states maintain a chain of custody log as a single record,⁵⁴ most do not. One state approach breaks up the components of a chain of custody log into separate documents: for example, Mississippi tracks the chain of custody with inventory logs, receipts, and a log of seal numbers with the officials who applied or removed them,⁵⁵ while Nevada and Washington both create separate chain of custody and seal logs.⁵⁶

EXAMPLE OF A SEAL LOG (WASHINGTON):

Wash. Admin. Code § 434-261-045

Use of numbered seals requires: (1) A seal log that documents the numbers of the seals and the individuals applying or removing seals

EXAMPLE OF AN AUDIT TRAIL (WASHINGTON):

Wash. Admin. Code § 434-250-130

Each county auditor shall maintain an audit trail with respect to the processing of ballots, which shall include, but not be limited to, the following: (1) A record of the date the ballot was mailed or issued, and the date the ballot was received; (2) The number of ballots issued and returned by precinct; (3) A record of the disposition of each request for a ballot that was not honored; (4) A record of the disposition of each returned ballot that was not counted; (5) A record of the time and place each time the county canvassing board met; and (6) Documentation of the security procedures undertaken to protect the integrity of all ballots after receipt, including the seal numbers used to secure the ballots during all facets of the process.

⁵³ ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMM'N, GLOSSARY OF ELECTION TERMINOLOGY (July 21, 2021), https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/glossary_files/Glossary_of_Election_Terms_EAC.pdf.

⁵⁴ [Colo. Code Regs. § 1505-1-20](#).

⁵⁵ [Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-519](#).

⁵⁶ [Nev. Admin. Code § 293B.022](#).

Washington's audit trail requirements illustrate how documentation requirements are translated into operational practice. Election offices implementing similar requirements may wish to compare these provisions with the Iowa Memory Card Log, Vermont Vault Log, and other continuous logging examples discussed in Part II. Those examples demonstrate how jurisdictions track equipment, media, and election materials throughout their entire lifecycle rather than only at individual transfer events.

In Florida, local election officials submit chain of custody plans to the state entity or official for approval based on the minimum requirements set by state code, including the requirement that all documentation forms be combined into a master custody document after the election.⁵⁷

Ultimately, different state approaches are attempting to create records of similar information. The specific information recorded in the chain of custody log will depend on the type of election material and stage of the election process, in addition to the differences discussed previously.

Physical Seals

Universally, states employ one or more types of seals to secure election materials and equipment.⁵⁸ The seal itself can be metal,⁵⁹ paper,⁶⁰ tape,⁶¹ a plastic security tie,⁶² padlock,⁶³ or other locking device approved for use. Seals are often required by law to be individually numbered, providing an additional data point for tracking and recording chain of custody.⁶⁴ While statutes frequently specify the type of seal that may be used, authority may be delegated to election offices to decide how seals are procured, documented, and managed from election to election. Whenever a seal is replaced, the legal custodian typically must document the reason for the replacement, the date of replacement, and verification by two individuals (one from each political party, whether observers, poll workers, or election officials) that the replacement seal matches the recorded number. Part II discusses operational approaches such as rotating seal colors, logging seal serial ranges upon receipt, and matching seal types to specific uses such as ballot transfer bags, transit cages, and equipment ports.

While some seals, like a numbered zip-tie seal on ballot containers, are tamper-evident to easily reveal when materials have been accessed, other seals are tamper-proof, like physical locks and keys.⁶⁵ In states that use physical keys to unseal election materials secured by a tamper-proof seal, statutes may explicitly prohibit a single official from retaining custody of a single access key; instead, at least two officials (one representing each political party, if possible) each retain a key.⁶⁶ While limiting the number of legal custodians and access points is important to maintain a secure chain of custody for election materials, including multiple officials helps to promote public accountability and oversight.

⁵⁷ [Fla. Admin. Code Ann. r. 1-15-2.015](#).

⁵⁸ See e.g., [Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 20118](#); [Ind. Code § 3-11-14.5-7](#); [Iowa Code § 49.65](#); [Me. Stat. tit. 21-A, § 699](#); [N.D. Cent. Code § 16.1-15-08](#).

⁵⁹ [Mich. Compiled Laws § 168.666](#); [S.D. Admin. R. 5:02:09:01.04](#).

⁶⁰ [W. Va. Code § 3-4A-19](#).

⁶¹ [N.J. Rev. Stat. § 19:18-2](#).

⁶² [Okla. Admin. Code § 230:35-5-75.3](#).

⁶³ [Tenn. Comp. R. & Regs. 1360-02-08-.02](#).

⁶⁴ See e.g., [Mich. Compiled Laws § 168.36](#).

⁶⁵ A 2022 incident in Colorado emphasizes the importance of tamper-evident seals: after a voter attempted to tamper with a voting machine, Pueblo County election officials immediately discovered the machine's broken seal and, following procedure, removed the voting machine from use without any other voters using it after tampering. See James Anderson, Man arrested on suspicion of tampering with voting machine, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Nov. 4, 2022, 12:57 PM), <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-technology-crime-colorado-arrests-a90baf8d9cdd85b107f91e7043974e7c>.

⁶⁶ See e.g., [Ind. Code § 3-11.5-6-25](#); [N.M. Code R. § 1.10.12.17](#).

EXAMPLE OF SPLITTING PHYSICAL KEYS (INDIANA):

[IND. CODE § 3-11.5-6-25](#)

The circuit court clerk shall do the following: (1) Lock the receptacle.... (2) Retain one (1) key to one (1) lock of the receptacle. (3) Give one (1) key to the other lock of the receptacle to the member of the county election board who is not a member of the same political party as the clerk.

Receipts

A receipt is a document certifying that election materials were received and accepted intact. A receipt is often created by the official preparing the materials for transfer and is subsequently signed, dated, and returned by the receiving official after the materials are received.⁶⁷ Some states, like Alabama in the example below, use “certificate” or similar language to refer to the receipt record. Receipts are used in the same manner throughout the election cycle.

EXAMPLE REQUIRING A RECEIPT (ALABAMA):

[ALA. CODE § 11-46-47\(C\)](#)

The election officials and at least two watchers of opposing interests (if any there shall be) shall then sign a certificate setting out that the keys were delivered intact, that the numbers on the protective counter and seal correspond with that on the envelope, that all the counters were set at zero and that the ballot labels were in their proper places.

Alabama’s receipt requirement illustrated above reflects a broader operational principle discussed in Part II: every transfer should identify both a giver and a receiver, document the condition of the materials, and record the specific date, time, counts, and seal numbers associated with the transfer.

Inventory Logs

An inventory log is the form used to record the **quantity** and **type** of all election materials stored, transferred, and received. Inventory logs are usually created by local election officials or entities and then supplemented by polling place officials, but this is not universal.⁶⁸ States use a variety of terms for forms that take inventory of election materials – register, accounting log, inventory list, and ballot manifest. Inventory logs are commonly signed by the official taking inventory.⁶⁹

Initially, the official or entity responsible for preparing and distributing election materials takes inventory of the total quantities prepared and the quantities distributed to each polling place.⁷⁰

67 See e.g., [Ariz. Rev. Stat. § 16-509](#); [Cal. Elec. Code § 14104](#).

68 Compare [Minn. R. 8230.0560](#) (“The local election official or county auditor shall package the ballots for each precinct in groups of 25, 50, or 100 and seal or place the ballots into a package or transfer case. The package or transfer case must contain a certificate stating the number of ballots it contains. The official conducting the election must maintain a record of the number of ballots issued to each precinct.”) and [0005-002 Wyo. Code R. § 13-3\(a\)](#) (“Election judges shall inventory ballots delivered...and the total shall be marked in the poll book or inventory log.”) with [N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 9, § 6210.7\(f\)](#) (“The county board shall inventory all ballots and ensure the security of any and all ballots while they are in the possession of the county board.”).

69 See e.g., [N.J. Rev. Stat. § 19:53C-11](#) (“Upon the completion of the inventory of all provisional ballots, and if the members of the district board agree on that inventory, the provisional ballot inventory form shall be signed by those members.”).

70 See e.g., [Nev. Admin. Code § 293.220](#) (“At least 2 days before any election, the county clerk shall prepare the...supplies for each polling place.... [including] a list of the inventory of the supplies provided to the election board.”).

EXAMPLE OF AN INVENTORY OF BALLOTS (MISSOURI):

[Mo. Code Regs. Ann. tit. 15, § 30-10.120](#)

Following the required inventory, the election authority shall sign an affidavit including the...number of ballots...and any discrepancies. In the case of discrepancies, the election authority shall include their assessment of the reason for the discrepancy.

From this point on, the same process plays out: the officials preparing a container or shipment take inventory and pack the log along with the materials, and then the receiving official or entity takes inventory of containers or shipments upon receipt to check for discrepancies.⁷¹

EXAMPLE OF INVENTORY AT CLOSE OF POLLS (MINNESOTA):

[MINN. STAT. § 204C.28](#)

[After polls close on Election Day] the clerk shall make a record of all materials delivered, the time of delivery, and the names of the election judges or other individuals who made delivery. The record must include the number of ballots delivered to the precinct...and the total number of ballots returned, as certified.... A discrepancy between the number of ballots delivered to the precinct and the number of total ballots returned by election judges that cannot be reconciled...must be noted...

Inventory logs form the basis for many ballot accounting procedures, particularly reconciliation and reporting, as shown in the example above; see the following section for additional discussion on reconciliation requirements. Part II discusses how election offices expand these statutory inventory and reconciliation requirements into recap sheets, ballot accounting forms, and reconciliation processes that compare ballots issued, cast, spoiled, and counted.

Reconciliation and Reporting

Election codes across the country require a written record of the number of all voted and unvoted ballots (no matter the form or type of the ballot), along with spoiled, duplicated, and invalid ballots, compared against initial inventory logs or other custody documents.⁷² While reconciliation is conducted initially to account for cast ballots and other election materials, the data from reconciliation can be used to improve election administration practices across the board, including custody practices and security measures.⁷³ States can use terms like ballot recap forms,⁷⁴ ballot accounting certificates,⁷⁵ and ballot reconciliation forms;⁷⁶ states without a formal term or form in their code still conduct the same accounting.⁷⁷ Ballot reconciliation and reporting can occur consistently as ballots are received

71 See e.g., [Nev. Admin. Code § 293C.400](#) ("After the polls are closed, the election board shall compare the quantity of its supplies that were furnished by the city clerk with the city clerk's inventory and make a notation upon the inventory of any materials that were lost, used or stolen.").

72 See e.g., [Haw. Code R. § 3-177-759](#) (duplicated ballots); [Tex. Elec. Code Ann. § 64.007](#) (spoiled ballots).

73 See e.g., [Wash. Rev. Code § 29A.60.235\(3\)](#) ("The secretary of state must collect the reconciliation reports from each county auditor and prepare a statewide reconciliation report. ... The state report must also include an analysis of the data that can be used to develop a better understanding of election administration and policy. The analysis must combine data, as available, over multiple years to provide broader comparisons and trends regarding voter registration and turnout and ballot counting.").

74 [Ga. Code Ann. § 21-2-484](#); [S.D. Admin. R. 5:02:09:16](#).

75 [Ala. Admin. Code r. 307-X-1-12](#).

76 [N.Y. Elec. Law § 9-106](#).

77 [S.C. Code Ann. § 7-13-1150](#).

via mail, drop boxes, or early voting,⁷⁸ it can be reserved for the end of voting and preparing for tabulation,⁷⁹ it can be required after tabulation, prior to post-election storage,⁸⁰ or state code can require multiple stages of reconciliation.⁸¹ In most states, reconciliation and reporting is conducted by two legal custodians from opposing political parties at the polling place or counting location; custodians often use the inventory log or other custody documents as a comparison point for reconciliation.⁸² The majority of states require reconciliation to compare against the polling place's inventory log to provide an additional data point to track the chain of custody.⁸³ In states that conduct this comparison, any discrepancies are immediately reported to the chief local elections official, such as the county clerk.⁸⁴

EXAMPLE OF BALLOT RECONCILIATION (NEW YORK):

N.Y. ELEC. LAW § 9-106

[Polling place officials] shall count, verify and record...the number of unused ballots, the number of ballots spoiled before delivery to voters in the poll site, the number of ballots spoiled and returned by voters and the number of affidavit ballots cast. These numbers shall be added to the number of ballots cast as recorded by the public counter number appearing on the ballot scanner screen(s) or results tape(s). The sum shall be recorded on the ballot reconciliation form. This resulting number shall be deducted from the number of ballots originally delivered to the election district or poll site, and the remainder number shall be determined to be the number of ballots secured in the emergency ballot box(es) or other secure storage container(s) provided by the board of elections.

New York's ballot reconciliation form demonstrates the type of post-election accounting that many jurisdictions perform. Part II expands on these concepts through discussion of recap sheets, independent review, reconciliation procedures, and post-election analysis designed to identify and explain discrepancies before certification.

Access Logs

Access logs, in differing forms, are used by most states throughout the election cycle; this is the documentation or electronic system (i.e., key cards) that tracks each person who enters and exits a secure area where election materials are held, when each person entered and exited, and the reason for entering.⁸⁵

78 [Colo. Code Regs. § 1505-1-20.7.1\(d\)](#) ("A minimum of two election judges of different party affiliations must reconcile and document all unvoted, issued, and spoiled paper ballots at the end of each day the polling center is open and immediately report any inventory discrepancies to the county clerk.").

79 [Mont. Admin. R. 44.3.2904\(3\)](#) ("For each election, county election administrators shall perform a reconciliation comparing the number of ballots printed to the number of issued, voided, or unissued ballots. Ballot reconciliations shall be completed prior to the start of the county canvass.").

80 [Wash. Rev. Code § 29A.60.235\(1\)](#) (The county auditor shall prepare at the time of certification an election reconciliation report...").

81 [Utah Code Ann. § 20A-4-109\(1\)](#) ("[A]n election officer whose office processes ballots shall...conduct ballot reconciliations: at the end of each day on which ballots are tabulated; or...as soon as the office finishes tabulating those ballots...[and] conduct a final ballot reconciliation when an election officer concludes processing all ballots...").

82 See Inventory Log discussion above; [Minn. Stat. § 204C.28](#).

83 See e.g., [N.Y. Elec. Law § 9-106](#).

84 See e.g., [Colo. Code Regs. § 1505-1-20.7.1\(d\)](#).

85 See e.g., [Miss. Code R. § 1-10-9.4](#); [N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 9, § 6210.11\(b\)](#).

EXAMPLE TO RECORD ALL ACCESS (CALIFORNIA):

[CAL. CODE REGS. TIT. 2, § 20253](#)

A Warehouse Access Log shall be maintained within the area of the warehouse where the unfinished ballot cards or ballot cards are stored. This log shall be maintained for every entry and exit of the warehouse at all times that unfinished ballot cards or ballot cards are being stored in the warehouse.

EXAMPLE TO RECORD NAMES OF PEOPLE WITH ACCESS (NEW HAMPSHIRE):

[N.H. REV. STAT. ANN. § 656:42](#)

Whenever the town or city clerk receives a programmed external storage device from the vendor, the clerk shall lock any programmed external storage device not inserted into an electronic ballot counting device in a safe and record the names of individuals that have access to such safe in the activity log.

Although states vary in how access is documented, these requirements closely mirror the principle of least privilege discussed in Part II. Access logs provide the documentary record demonstrating that only authorized individuals entered secure areas or handled sensitive election materials.

Incident Reports

If any security measures or custody documents indicate a break in the chain of custody, state codes broadly require that officials prepare an incident report. Many states explicitly require the legal custodian to create an incident report immediately upon discovering the issue, including steps taken to remedy the breach.⁸⁶ States can make it the legal custodian's duty to at least attempt to remedy a breach immediately (e.g., removing polling place equipment for repairs or replacement) and notify their local or state chief elections official or entity within a time period set by code, and while a few states prescribe a uniform incident report form, it is common to leave the specific notification process and form up to local officials or entities.⁸⁷

EXAMPLE OF DEFINITIONS (IOWA):

[Iowa Admin. Code r. 721-29.1](#)

"Breach" means a compromise of security processes that leads to the accidental or unlawful destruction, loss, alteration, unauthorized disclosure of, or access to protected information.

"Incident" means an occurrence that actually or potentially jeopardizes the confidentiality, integrity, or availability of an information system or the information the system processes, stores, or transmits or that constitutes a violation or imminent threat of violation of security policies, security procedures, or acceptable use policies.

⁸⁶ See e.g., [Wash. Admin. Code § 434-261-007](#).

⁸⁷ See e.g., [Cal. Elec. Code § 17603](#).

EXAMPLE REQUIRING IMMEDIATE NOTIFICATION AND REMEDIATION (CALIFORNIA):

[CAL. CODE REGS. TIT. 2, § 20690](#)

If the chain of custody for any component of the voting system has been compromised, the security or information has been breached or attempted to be breached, or experiences a fatal error from which it cannot recover gracefully ... the governing board of the jurisdiction ... must take the following actions: (1) Notify the chief elections official of the jurisdiction immediately; (2) Notify the Secretary of State within 24 hours of discovery; (3) Remove the equipment from service immediately and replace if possible; (4) Subject any votes cast on the device prior to its removal from service to a 1% manual tally or a risk-limiting audit, by the processes described in Elections Code sections 15360 and 15367, as part of the official canvass; (5) Secure any memory card containing data from that device and retain it for the full election retention period as described in Chapter 4 of Division 17 of the Elections Code; (6) Store an image of all device software and firmware on write-once media and retain securely for the full election retention period ...; and (7) Reinstall all device software and firmware from a read-only version of the approved firmware and software supplied directly by the Secretary of State before the equipment is placed back into service.

EXAMPLE OF INCIDENT REPORTING (COLORADO):

[COLO. CODE REGS. 1505-1-20.12.2](#)

If a county clerk discovers or determines that a [custody or security] violation...has occurred, they must file an incident report with the Department of State as soon as feasible, but not later than two business days, following discovery or determination of the incident. The incident report must describe in detail the incident and the rule that may have been violated and any other information the Department may require. If an issue arises that does not constitute a violation...but the county clerk or Department believes an incident report should be filed, the clerk must file an incident report as soon as feasible.

EXAMPLE OF A REQUIREMENT TO GENERATE A PLAN FOR INCIDENT REPORTING (TEXAS):

[TEX. ELEC. CODE ANN. § 129.052](#)

The general custodian of election records shall create a recovery plan to be followed if a breach in security procedures is indicated. This plan must include immediately notifying the secretary of state.

Incident reporting requirements serve as the legal counterpart to the corrective controls discussed in Part II. While statutes typically focus on notification and documentation, election offices must also establish recovery plans, escalation procedures, and remediation protocols before an incident occurs.

6 | PRE-ELECTION PREPARATION: PAPER BALLOTS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The chain of custody begins before ballots reach voters and includes the printing, storage, and distribution of official ballots.
- States commonly employ anti-fraud measures such as security paper, watermarks, barcodes, serial numbers, or other authentication features to distinguish official ballots from unauthorized reproductions.
- Ballot printing facilities are frequently subject to enhanced security measures, including access controls, surveillance requirements, inventory procedures, and election-official oversight.
- While states vary in the specific safeguards they require, all approaches seek to ensure that only authentic ballots enter the chain of custody and remain accounted for throughout the election cycle.

While the custody documentation and security measures discussed above create the structure for the entire chain of custody, that structure rests on the foundation laid by pre-election preparation of election materials. Whether paper ballots are printed and distributed to polling places or printed by machine on election day, states can employ a variety of anti-fraud measures, like security paper, watermarks, and unique identifiers like serial numbers or barcodes to properly authenticate official paper ballots throughout the chain of custody.⁸⁸ Commonly, state code sets the minimum standard for printed ballots and then allows a level of variation by local election officials or entities.⁸⁹ In all instances, the purpose of anti-fraud measures is to prevent erroneous ballots from entering and remaining in the chain of custody, ensuring that only authentic ballots are tabulated.

EXAMPLE OF ANTI-FRAUD COUNTERMEASURES (GEORGIA):

[GA. CODE ANN. § 21-2-372](#)

[T]he ballots shall be printed on security paper that incorporates features which can be used to authenticate the ballot as an official ballot but which do not make the ballot identifiable to a particular elector, provided that at least one such feature is a visible watermark that identifies the ballot as an official Georgia ballot

Georgia's anti-fraud provisions illustrate one approach to authenticating official ballots before distribution. Part II discusses how jurisdictions operationalize these requirements through ballot inventory controls, printer oversight, and vendor accountability procedures that extend beyond the minimum statutory requirements. Ballots can be printed by state or local elections official or entity, or by a third-party vendor, and states prescribe a variety of oversight methods: access logs for printing and pre-election storage facilities,⁹⁰ and monitoring of printing, with some state codes requiring video surveillance by printing vendors, or in-person monitoring by a designated official, as shown in the examples below.

⁸⁸ See e.g., [Idaho Code § 34-901\(2\)](#).

⁸⁹ See e.g., [Ariz. Rev. Stat. § 16-504](#).

⁹⁰ See e.g., [Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 20253](#).

FIRST EXAMPLE OF PRINT FACILITY SECURITY AND MONITORING (OHIO):

[OHIO ADMIN. CODE 111:3-10-10](#)

Print vendors shall maintain.... [v]ideo cameras with continuous recording capabilities placed both inside and outside of the building. Cameras shall cover any entrance and exit as well as any area in which ballot printing or manufacturing takes place.

SECOND EXAMPLE OF PRINT FACILITY SECURITY AND MONITORING (UTAH):

[UTAH ADMIN. CODE R. R623-9-4](#)

A vendor shall have: ...a secure facility that includes...24-hour facility security through on-site security staffing, alarm system, or video surveillance

EXAMPLE OF PRINTER MONITORING (VIRGINIA):

[Va. Code Ann. § 24.2-617](#)

The electoral board or general registrar shall designate one person to be continuously present in the room in which the ballots are printed from the start to the end of the work and ensure that the undertakings of the printer's statement are complied with strictly.

These three provisions above illustrate different approaches to securing ballot production facilities. Similar controls appear in Part II's discussion of planning activities, including physical security design, facility access controls, camera coverage, and vendor management practices

7 | PRE-ELECTION PREPARATION: MACHINES

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Voting systems, tabulation equipment, and related devices must be tested and secured before they are deployed for an election.
- Logic and accuracy testing is nearly universal among the states, although the specifics of testing procedures differ significantly by jurisdiction.
- States commonly require public observation of at least some testing activities to promote transparency and confidence in election administration.
- Testing itself is a chain-of-custody event, requiring equipment access, documentation, resealing, and verification before voting begins.

For voting machines, tabulation equipment, and electronic pollbooks, the start of pre-election preparation is marked when the official or entity who retains custody of the machines programs the machines and conducts logic and accuracy testing. The exact testing regime differs slightly across the different device manufacturers and the use cases of each state, but universally, logic and accuracy testing is conducted on all voting and tabulation machines

prior to any use; there may be multiple stages of testing between removal from storage and the start of voting. Detailed logic and accuracy testing processes are sometimes fully contained in state code,⁹¹ but many states simply require pre-election tests and prescribe that duty to election officials in their code.⁹² In those states, specific testing procedures are then contained in manufacturer manuals, official election administration manuals issued by the state-level elections entity,⁹³ or in election-specific plans submitted to the state by individual localities.⁹⁴ While access may be limited to partisan representatives or observers, or expanded to include all members of the public, state codes generally provide for at least one public test at the polling place before voting begins; the public test can be the same logic and accuracy test performed prior, or it can be a standalone public event.⁹⁵

EXAMPLE OF HARDWARE DIAGNOSTIC TEST REQUIREMENTS (COLORADO):

COLO. CODE REGS. § 1505-1-11.3.1

The designated election official must perform the Hardware Diagnostic Test before the election on each device that the designated election official will use in the election, including spare or back up devices. The test must include the following devices and provide the following information: (1) All input and output devices; (2) Communications ports; (3) System printers; (4) System modems when applicable; (5) System screen displays; (6) Boot performance and initializations; (7) Display of firmware or software hash value (MD5 or SHA-1) when possible; (8) Confirmation that screen displays are functioning; (9) Date, time and calibration of systems, if applicable; and (10) Scanner calibration, if applicable. (b) The designated election official must seal each device upon the successful completion of the test and retain documentation of the seal information and all records in accordance with [state law].

Colorado's diagnostic testing requirements illustrate how chain-of-custody controls extend to election equipment before voting begins. The operational implications of this process, including pre-election testing, seal verification, zeroing procedures, and equipment preparation, are discussed in Part II's Planning and Execution procedures.

EXAMPLE OF LOGIC AND ACCURACY TESTING REQUIREMENTS (IDAHO):

IDAHO CODE § 34-2426

Each county clerk shall hold a public logic and accuracy test prior to election day to demonstrate to the public that the vote tally system is accurately reading and tabulating votes cast. The county clerk shall adopt procedures for testing...

91 See e.g., [N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 9, § 6210.8](#) and the Colorado regulation in the example below.

92 See e.g., [Mont. Admin. R. 44.3.1717\(2\)](#) ("All voting systems must be secured as provided in accordance with the procedures specified in the instruction manuals, user guides, and technical manuals provided by the manufacturer of the voting system, as well as the election judge handbook and testing and security procedures provided by the office of the Secretary of State...").

93 See e.g., [Ariz. Rev. Stat. § 16-452](#) ("[T]he secretary of state shall prescribe rules to achieve and maintain the maximum degree of correctness, impartiality, uniformity and efficiency on the procedures for early voting and voting, and of producing, distributing, collecting, counting, tabulating and storing ballots. The rules shall be prescribed in an official instructions and procedures manual..."); SEC'Y OF STATE OF MONT., UNIFORM BALLOT AND VOTING SYSTEMS PROCEDURES GUIDE, <https://sosmt.gov/wp-content/uploads/Uniform-Voting-Systems-Guide.pdf>.

94 See e.g., [Tex. Elec. Code Ann. § 129.023\(c\)](#) ("The general custodian of election records shall adopt procedures for [logic and accuracy] testing [the voting system]...").

95 See e.g., [0005-002 Wyo. Code R. § 29-6\(e\)](#) ("The County Clerk shall hold a public L&A test of the voting equipment before any ballot tabulation device is used. The County Clerk shall notify in writing, as specified in W.S. 22-10-108, the chairman of each political party and all independent candidates informing them of the date, time, and place for testing the ballot marking and ballot tabulation devices. Other witnesses may be present.").

Idaho's public testing requirement demonstrates the connection between chain of custody procedures and transparency. Part II discusses how public testing, observation opportunities, and documentation of testing activities can strengthen public confidence in election administration.

8 | VOTING PERIOD

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- During voting, custody expands beyond election administrators to include poll workers, voters, absentee-ballot collection teams, and other authorized participants in the election process.
- States generally seek to ensure that election materials are handled only by authorized individuals and remain secured whenever they are not actively in use.
- Monitoring requirements vary, but most jurisdictions require periodic inspection of election equipment and procedures for responding to equipment failures or potential security incidents.
- Mail ballots and ballot drop boxes have become increasingly important areas of chain-of-custody regulation, with states employing a variety of approaches to collection, transportation, documentation, and security.

Once preparation and testing are complete, custody shifts from election administrators preparing materials to officials responsible for supervising live voting. On Election Day or during a day of early voting, the election materials used at a polling place will be in the custody of the chief polling place official.⁹⁶ During in-person voting, polling place officials are responsible for handing voters their individual ballots, monitoring the act of voting and ensuring that any voting equipment used remains secure and in working order.⁹⁷ Additionally, officials are responsible for logging received ballots, verifying voter information, and ensuring that all ballots are properly secured prior to tabulation.⁹⁸ The chain of custody expands to include the voter during this stage, and while casting paper ballots is conducted in a myriad of ways, all approaches try to accomplish the same end: namely that, during voting, each ballot is only handled by a polling place official and a qualified voter, and that both the official and voter understand the ballot is cast properly.⁹⁹

During voting hours, some state codes require that polling place officials monitor election materials in some form as voters cast their ballots. Ballots may be put into a ballot box or tabulation machine by the voter themselves,¹⁰⁰ or state code may require voters to hand their voted ballot to an official for placement in a ballot box or tabulation

96 See e.g., [17 R.I. Gen. Laws § 17-19-19](#) (providing that “the optical scan precinct count units, memory cartridges, and voted computer ballots shall remain in the care and custody of the warden, who shall see that the voting equipment is not defaced or injured by any voter or any other person.”).

97 See e.g., [25 Pa. Cons. Stat. § 3059](#) (“No person other than the election officers shall take or remove any ballot from the polling place.”).

98 See e.g., [Ala. Code § 17-11-10\(2\)](#).

99 See e.g., [Ark. Code Ann. § 7-5-617\(d\)\(1\)–\(3\)](#); [Colo. Code Regs. § 1505-1-20\(20.4\)\(a\)](#).

100 See e.g., [Me. Stat. tit. 21-A, § 671](#).

machine.¹⁰¹ In between each voter casting a ballot via machine, election officials or poll workers may verify that each machine is secure and ready for use. Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) machines are often monitored persistently, and state codes often prescribe more detailed instructions for DRE machines than the monitoring of other election materials,¹⁰² but overall, state codes require periodic monitoring of all equipment that is used by voters in the polling place.¹⁰³ Periodic monitoring is not the same as constant; requiring an occasional or regular examination of equipment during voting is most common, but some state approaches do require an official standing by each piece of equipment in the polling place throughout voting hours.¹⁰⁴

EXAMPLE OF MONITORING ON ELECTION DAY (FLORIDA):

FLA. STAT. § 101.5613

A member of the election board or...a representative of the supervisor of elections shall occasionally examine the face of the voting device and the ballot information [during voting] to determine that the device and the ballot information have not been damaged or tampered with.

State codes can contain requirements to seal ballot drop boxes and include constant video surveillance; the former is a common requirement, while the latter is not.¹⁰⁵

EXAMPLE OF DROP BOX REQUIREMENTS (VERMONT):

VT. STAT. ANN. TIT. 17., § 2543A(B)

At a minimum, drop boxes shall: (1) be affixed to a foundation or other immovable object such that they cannot be removed without being tampered with; (2) be under 24-hour video surveillance or in the alternative be within sight of the municipal building; (3) be constructed in such a manner that it is impossible to remove the ballots without the ballot box being tampered with; and (4) be able to be closed such that ballots may not be deposited once the deadline for deposit has passed.

While statutes often prescribe minimum requirements for drop box security, election offices must still develop operational procedures governing collection schedules, transfer documentation, bipartisan retrieval teams, and ballot tracking systems.¹⁰⁶ Examples of those procedures are discussed in Part II's mail ballot and absentee processing section.

State codes have a variety of methods for fixing or replacing voting or tabulation machines during voting, but methods are generally united by requiring the presence of two custodians or witnesses during the repairs, one representing each major political party, and by requiring that the custodians record and report the incident.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ See e.g., [Cal. Elec. Code § 14277](#).

¹⁰² Compare [Wash. Admin. Code § 434-250-095](#) with [Tex. Elec. Code Ann. § 125.005](#).

¹⁰³ See e.g., [Fla. Stat. § 101.5613](#).

¹⁰⁴ See e.g., [Tenn. Code Ann. § 2-7-122](#).

¹⁰⁵ [Wash. Admin. Code § 434-261-045](#) ("Secure storage must employ the use of numbered seals and logs, or other security measures, that document each individual's access to the voted ballots or voted ballot images, and detect inappropriate access to the secure storage."); [Ky. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 117.086\(c\)](#) ("Any drop-box...shall be...[u]nder video surveillance at all times.").

¹⁰⁶ Providing this kind of discretion to local offices can allow for quick responses to remediate issues when necessary. In 2024, drop boxes in Clark County, WA and Multnomah County, OR were both targeted with incendiary devices and election offices in both counties immediately responded by changing their security measures, see Paul Gronke and Paul Manson, *Explainer & Lessons Learned From the Ballot Drop Box Fires in Multnomah County, Oregon and Clark County, Washington*, ELECTIONS & VOTING INFO. CTR. (Oct. 30, 2024), <https://evic.reed.edu/evic-news/explainer-ballot-drop-box-fires-in-multnomah-county-or-and-clark-county-wa/>.

¹⁰⁷ See e.g., [Ariz. Rev. Stat. § 16-574](#); [Va. Code Ann. § 24.2-642\(A\)](#).

EXAMPLE OF TRANSPARENCY REGARDING VOTING EQUIPMENT ISSUES (MASSACHUSETTS):

[MASS. GEN. LAWS CH. 54, § 33B](#)

If through mechanical failure a machine ceases to function, it shall be inspected and put in working order, if possible, by the custodian of voting machines...in the presence of two election officers of different political parties, who shall make and sign a statement setting forth the cause of the failure of the machine to properly operate and such statement shall be filed with the election returns. If the machine cannot be put in working order, it shall be placed out of service for that election and a statement that the machine is out of order shall be signed by the election officers and filed with the election returns.

This requirement illustrates the close relationship between equipment troubleshooting and chain of custody. Part II discusses how election offices can structure repair and replacement procedures to maintain documentation, transparency, and bipartisan observation throughout the process.

9 | TABULATION

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The conclusion of voting marks one of the most heavily regulated transitions in the chain of custody process.
- States universally require election materials to be secured, documented, and accounted for before tabulation can begin.
- Reconciliation and ballot accounting procedures provide an important mechanism for verifying that election materials remain complete and properly documented.
- Although observation of tabulation is often permitted, state laws consistently restrict physical handling of election materials to authorized election officials and custodians.

When voting concludes, election officials reconcile, secure, and prepare all election materials for counting. This stage represents one of the most heavily regulated custody transitions in state codes, with state codes detailing custody and security actions step-by-step. Whether states tabulate votes on-site at the polling place, or at a separate, central counting location, state election codes universally require the designated legal custodian to prepare and seal election materials for tabulation after voting ends.¹⁰⁸ For DRE voting machines, this often involves printing the machine's record of the total number of votes for each candidate or measure and transferring digital ballot images to a removable memory card or other storage.¹⁰⁹ If materials are transferred to a counting location, the measures and documentation described previously in the Transfers section apply. All states require the reconciliation of election materials at this stage of the election, but states may conduct reconciliation throughout the voting period as well; see the Reconciliation and Reporting section for additional discussion.

¹⁰⁸ See e.g., [Ind. Code § 3-12-3.5-4.5](#); [25 Pa. Cons. Stat. § 3066](#).

¹⁰⁹ See e.g., [Ala. Code § 17-12-1](#); [Nev. Rev. Stat. § 293B.330](#).

EXAMPLE OF SECURING MATERIALS AT CLOSE OF POLLS (TEXAS):

[TEX. ELEC. CODE ANN. § 127.066](#)

Immediately on completion of voting at a polling place...an election officer shall seal the deposit slot in each box so that nothing can be deposited through the slot without breaking the seal. (b) The presiding judge, an election clerk, and not more than two watchers, if one or more watchers are present, shall sign the seal. The watchers must be of opposing interests if such watchers are present. (c) After the box is sealed, it shall be delivered to the central counting station by two election officers. The officers shall deliver the box to the presiding judge of the central counting station or to the judge's designee.

Despite differences in state tabulation processes and legal custodians during the initial canvass and recounts, only authorized officials are permitted to touch election materials across state codes; any persons allowed to observe the count under state law, such as election watchers, members of the public, or journalists, are not allowed access to any election materials.¹¹⁰

EXAMPLE LIMITING CONTACT BUT PERMITTING OBSERVATION (ARKANSAS):

[ARK. CODE ANN. § 7-5-615](#)

The counting of votes...shall be open to the public, and any candidate or political party may be present in person or by representative.... No person except those employed and authorized for that purpose shall touch any ballot or return.

Many of these tools are discussed from an operational perspective in Part II, including chain-of-custody forms, inventory logs, access logs, seal logs, and incident reporting procedures. After tabulation is complete, election materials are transferred into storage and documentation is finalized and, if required, transmitted to the appropriate local or state authority; see the Transfer and Secure Storage sections for additional discussion.

¹¹⁰ See e.g., [Colo. Rev. Stat. § 1-7-507](#) ("All proceedings at the counting centers shall be under the direction of the designated election official and the representatives of the political parties, if a partisan election, or watchers, if a nonpartisan election. No persons, except those authorized for the purpose, shall touch any ballot, ballot card, "prom" or other electronic device, or return."); [N.M. Stat. Ann. § 1-12-29](#) ("Only the members of the precinct board, candidates or their representatives, representatives of the news media and lawfully appointed challengers and watchers may be present while the votes are being counted and tallied. Only members of the precinct board shall handle ballots, signature rosters or tally sheets or take part in the counting and tallying."); [Wis. Stat. § 5.87](#) ("All proceedings at the polling place and at any central counting location shall be open to the public, but no person, except those employed and authorized for the purpose, may touch any ballot, container, envelope, return or equipment.").

CONCLUSION

Every state maintains procedures intended to preserve the security, accountability, and integrity of election materials throughout the election cycle. As this review demonstrates, states often approach chain of custody through different combinations of statutes, regulations, official manuals, and local procedures, but the underlying objectives remain remarkably consistent. Across jurisdictions, election officials must document who had custody of election materials, when custody changed, how materials were secured, and how discrepancies or incidents are addressed.

States differ in the level of detail contained within their election codes. Some prescribe exact procedures for transportation, storage, documentation, reconciliation, and equipment security, while others delegate operational details to election authorities. Despite these differences, common themes emerge throughout state approaches, including bipartisan oversight, documentation of transfers, secure storage, inventory controls, reconciliation requirements, and incident response procedures.

This review is not intended to serve as a checklist, scorecard, or assessment of any jurisdiction. Rather, it illustrates the variety of approaches states have adopted to address common chain-of-custody challenges and highlights examples that the elections community may find helpful as they evaluate and strengthen their own processes. As election administration continues to evolve, chain-of-custody practices should be viewed as a process of continuous improvement, informed by operational experience, technological developments, and lessons learned from election administration across the country.

LEGAL LANDSCAPE APPENDIX: JUDICIAL REMEDIES FOR CHAIN OF CUSTODY BREACHES

Analysis of the judicial principles and remedies for breaks in custody.

When breaks in the chain of custody occur, courts may be asked to remediate. This Appendix reviews cases in which courts have responded when chain of custody rules are violated.

Two disclaimers are warranted. First, several cases described here involve older cases in which ballot custody practices were more primitive than in modern elections. Today's ballot custody procedures in every state, as other parts of this report detail, feature multiple layers of chain of custody protections to ensure that even where lapses occur, chain of custody can be verified through other means. Second, cases involving chain of custody breaches in elections share a common denominator: they are highly context-specific. Courts must react not just to the facts of specific cases, but to witness testimony and procedural nuances that vary significantly state to state. This is to say, there is no one-size-fits-all remedial approach in ballot custody breach cases.

With this table set, the following discussion situates where ballot custody breaches are addressed procedurally, whether state statute constrains remedial options, and what remedial paths courts have undertaken when asked to address breaches in chain of custody in election cases.

Custody Breaches in Litigation

Courts may become involved in providing remedies for breaks in the chain of custody when the process for storing and maintaining election materials is compromised.¹¹¹ For example, litigants have sought judicial remedy when election officials leave ballot boxes in a room accessible to unauthorized individuals, when a broken seal on election equipment may indicate unauthorized access to the votes, or when signatures documenting chain of custody are missing, and so forth.¹¹² Some election chain of custody cases feature evidence of ballot or election equipment tampering, which may suggest chain of custody practices were not followed. In each case, courts may be tasked with determining whether a chain of custody lapse should impact the outcome of elections and/or which votes (if any) should be counted.

¹¹¹ As understood here, a chain of custody breach is any act or circumstance that creates the potential for ballot tampering. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Sec. Agency, CISA Insights: Chain of Custody and Critical Infrastructure Systems 1 (2021).

¹¹² Since chain of custody rules vary state to state, what constitutes a potential breach varies as well (see discussion of state codes in Part I of this report).

In exceedingly rare instances, law enforcement may seek a warrant for election materials as part of an investigation into purported election irregularities. In *Ex parte Brown*, 97 Cal. 83 (Cal. 1892), an election official went to jail rather than turn over a sealed packet of ballots after receiving a court order (not a warrant) to do so. The election official cited a state chain of custody law requiring ballots be handled by election officials only.

The California Supreme Court held the election official could not be held in contempt and jailed for upholding state law and refusing to turn over the sealed ballots to be used as evidence in court, writing, “[i]t is ... not only inconsistent with the terms of the law, but destructive of its policy, to hold that the ballots, for the security and integrity of which such careful provision is made, are subject to be removed from the custody of the registrar, opened, handled, and exposed to the danger of all sorts of changes and mutilations as often as any judicial officer may conclude that they contain evidence material to an issue depending before him. For when once the terms of the statute are set aside, not only judges of the highest character and position can order the sealed ballots to be produced and opened, but every judicial officer in the state may do the like, and it will depend wholly upon his individual judgment and discretion what precautions shall be taken to prevent them from being tampered with. The object of the law being to afford the means of impeaching the returns of the election officers, not only all candidates, but the entire public, is interested in preserving the integrity of the sealed packages of ballots, for they cannot be produced in evidence without satisfactory preliminary proof that they remain in the same condition in which they were taken from the ballot-box. When they have been kept by the clerk or registrar, such proof is an extremely simple matter. When they have been beyond his control, it becomes extremely difficult, and in many cases impossible.” *Id.* at 89-90.

Procedural Posture and Statutory Remedies

As the regulatory overview of this report shows, states maintain detailed chain of custody requirements to ensure the integrity of election materials through statutes, regulations, and rules. When election officials fail to follow chain of custody rules or the chain of custody is otherwise breached, litigants typically pursue chain of custody remedies through challenge, contest, or protest proceedings as authorized by state statute. Chain of custody breaches or discrepancies may also be discovered during recount processes. The procedural posture for addressing breaks in the chain of custody is therefore variable state to state, though every state's election code provides a vehicle for litigants to challenge, contest, or protest election results for reasons that may include alleged breaches in chain of custody of election ballots or equipment.

Although most states lack explicit remedial guidance for courts handling chain of custody breach cases, every state allows procedures for challenging or contesting results where breaks in the chain of custody are alleged. Some state statutes limit the circumstances under which courts may remedy chain of custody breaches. Michigan law, for example, states that “[a] ballot cast by an eligible elector must not be rejected or otherwise not counted in a canvass, recount, or court order altering the certification of a canvassing board on the grounds that an election official failed to comply with a directive set forth in this act unless that ballot is otherwise ineligible under this act or federal law.”¹¹³

¹¹³ Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.814 (2024).

This suggests that, for example, a court may lack authority to remedy a chain of custody breach if the breach resulted from election official error. Michigan courts may therefore be limited in their authority to invalidate ballots and must have more evidence than just a break in the chain of custody to invalidate ballots.

Some states provide criminal penalties for election officers who knowingly breach chain of custody requirements.¹¹⁴ Even where state statutes and regulations outline ballot chain of custody procedures, including imposing criminal penalties on those responsible for intentional breaches, statutory guidance generally does not provide courts with remedial mandates for handling breaches in the chain of custody, leaving the issue to adjudication in recount, contest, or challenge proceedings, as applicable.

Remedial Standards

When the chain of custody is broken, courts have taken a range of remedial approaches: (a) counting votes despite a break in the chain of custody; (b) vacating the election and ordering a new election; (c) invalidating only the subset of ballots affected by the breach in the chain of custody and determining the winner from the remaining ballots. The discussion below reviews examples of courts undertaking each of these remedial options.

Break in the Chain of Custody, Still Count Votes

Deciding to invalidate ballots due to a break in the chain of custody risks disenfranchising voters. Especially in cases where no evidence suggests the break in the chain of custody resulted in ballot tampering, courts are generally loath to invalidate lawful ballots.

In *Galvan v. Vera*,¹¹⁵ a Texas Court of Appeals case from 2018, plaintiffs filed a contest seeking to invalidate an election alleging chain of custody procedures had not been followed. The trial court found the ballot boxes and voting machines had been properly secured with locks and seals. However, the Texas Election Code required the authority responsible for distributing election supplies to record the serial numbers of the seals used on the ballot boxes. In that instance, election officials relied on poll watchers (i.e., not the correct duly authorized official) to record the seal numbers placed on the ballot boxes when they were first sealed. The trial court further found that election officials had not recorded those first seal numbers at the beginning of voting as required by statute. Still, the trial court refused to invalidate the election because plaintiffs had presented “no direct evidence that any of these machine topped voting box seals were tampered with or replaced.”¹¹⁶ The appellate court agreed, holding that, “While those charged with conducting elections should use every precaution possible to see that elections are conducted strictly in accordance with the provisions of the Election Code, nevertheless, after an election has been held and it appears that it has been fairly conducted and the result correctly declared, and there were no charges of fraud, misconduct or illegality, the entire election will not be set aside for irregularities in the manner of conducting the election....”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ For example, Indiana law asserts that anyone “entrusted with the custody of ballots who knowingly: (1) opens a package in which the ballots are contained; (2) destroys a ballot; or (3) delivers such a package or ballot to a person not entitled to receive it; commits a Level 6 felony.” See Ind. Code Ann. § 3-14-2-23 (West 2014).

¹¹⁵ 2018 WL 4096383, at *2 (Tex. App. Aug. 29, 2018).

¹¹⁶ *Id.*

¹¹⁷ *Id.* at *5.

In another example from the Connecticut Supreme Court in 2023, a plaintiff in a Connecticut election contest alleged numerous failures to comply with ballot custody rules.¹¹⁸ In affirming the trial court and refusing to invalidate the election, the Connecticut Supreme Court emphasized that, “under our democratic form of government, an election is the paradigm of the democratic process designed to ascertain and implement the will of the people. ... The purpose of the election statutes is to ensure the true and most accurate count possible of the votes for the candidates in the election. ... In implementing [the voting] process, moreover, when an individual ballot is questioned, no voter is to be disfranchised on a doubtful construction, and statutes tending to limit the exercise of the ballot should be liberally construed in his [or her] favor.”¹¹⁹

Vacate the Election

In other instances, breaks in the chain of custody lead courts not just to invalidate ballots, but to vacate election results entirely. Take an example, again from Illinois. In a town officer election, the Republican candidate won by a margin of 44 votes; the Democratic candidate promptly filed an election contest.¹²⁰ The Illinois Supreme Court reviewed whether certain ballots that lacked a judicial signature (as part of the chain of custody process) were valid.¹²¹ Illinois law requires that “one of the judges of the election shall indorse his initials on the back of the ballot in such manner that they may be seen when the ballot is properly folded” and “[n]o ballot without the official indorsement shall be allowed to be deposited in the ballot box, and none but ballots provided in accordance with the provisions of this act shall be counted.”¹²² In this case, evidence showed that several ballots were marked with the correct judge’s initials, but those initials had been imposed by the other election judges rather than the required one.¹²³ Unlike *Craig v. Peterson* discussed above, the Illinois Supreme Court in this case ruled that “the statute is mandatory in its provision that the judge of the election must indorse his own initials upon the ballots that he hands out to the voters to be voted, and that ballots cannot be legally counted upon which a judge of election indorses the initials of another judge and hands them out to the voters to be voted and without indorsing his own initials thereon.”¹²⁴ Since the testimony from the three election judges showed that two judges indorsed the third judge’s initials, the Illinois Supreme Court ultimately held that not a single ballot had been legally cast and subsequently voided the election results.¹²⁵

118 Namely, that the election officials failed to seal the outer and inner envelopes of absentee ballots in a depository envelope with nonreusable tape, as required by § 9-150a (f), failed to endorse the names, voting district, and time of count on each absentee ballot depository envelope, as required by § 9-150a (f), processed and counted absentee ballots that should have been rejected, failed to properly maintain the chain of custody of the absentee ballots in accordance with statutorily mandated procedures, and failed to properly endorse the depository envelopes in accordance with statutorily mandated procedures, failed to properly endorse the absentee ballots’ outer envelopes, as required by § 9-140c (a), failed to prepare affidavits reflecting the times that the ballots changed hands, among other alleged deficiencies. *Cohen v. Rossi*, 346 Conn. 642, 650–51 (Ct. 2023).

119 *Id.* at 655–56.

120 *Laird v. Williams*, 118 N.E. 73, 74 (Ill. 1917).

121 *Id.*

122 *Id.*

123 *Id.*

124 *Id.* at 75.

125 *Id.* at 76. For additional examples of courts voiding election results upon breaks in the chain of custody, see *Pabey v. Pastrick*, 816 N.E.2d 1138 (Ind. 2004) (“a deliberate series of actions occurred making it impossible to determine the candidate who received the highest number of legal votes cast in the election and that the trial court erred in denying Pabey’s request for a special election”); *Rogers v. Holder*, 636 So.2d 645 (Miss. 1994) (vacating and ordering a special election was warranted despite the number of illegal being small); *Marks v. Stinson*, 19 F.3d 873 (3d Cir. 1994) (“If the district court finds a constitutional violation, it will have authority to order a special election, whether or not it is able to determine what the results would have been in the absence of that violation”); *Foulkes v. Hays*, 537 P.2d 777 (Wash. 1975) (a special election was justified because the true election outcome could not be determined).

Evidence of Tampering: Approaches

When a breach in the chain of custody gives rise to the potential for ballot tampering, some courts elect a third option invalidating only affected ballots and recalculating the result of the election accordingly. Under this approach, courts generally follow one of two paths. One is to treat any opportunity for ballot tampering as if the affected ballots had been tampered with, thereby invalidating the exposed ballots or preventing them from being counted and/or used as evidence in election contest suits. This approach ultimately focuses on preserving the integrity of the election above all else. In contrast, some courts prioritize protecting against voter disenfranchisement by requiring direct evidence of tampering to invalidate exposed ballots, even where ample opportunity for tampering may have existed.

No Evidence of Tampering Required

Even without evidence of tampering, some states treat any break in the ballot chain of custody as if the ballots had been tampered with and hold such ballots cannot be included in vote totals. In 1912, for example, the Louisiana Supreme Court in *Thornhill v. Wear* held that ballots that were in breach of the chain of custody must be invalidated because the court could not rule out the possibility they had been tampered with.¹²⁶ The plaintiff and the defendant in the case were opposing candidates in the 1912 Democratic primary for a judicial nomination.¹²⁷ After a hearing, instead of safely securing the ballots, the election officers left them “scattered about the courtroom, and that they so remained unattended to by anybody and exposed to be tampered with by whoever might choose to do so from the date of said trial.”¹²⁸ Since the chain of custody had been violated, the court determined that those ballots could not be admitted into evidence in the plaintiff’s election contest suit.¹²⁹ While the court acknowledged that there was no actual evidence of ballot tampering, it focused on the possibility that someone could leave no trace of their actions and ultimately favored preserving the integrity of the election.¹³⁰

Similarly, in 1952, the Louisiana First Circuit Court of Appeals reaffirmed that ballots should be invalidated if the chain of custody is breached, thereby providing an opportunity for tampering.¹³¹ In an election contest suit, the court found that two days after the election, ballot boxes were delivered to and held by the “Deputy Sheriff to the Clerk of Court’s Office in Donaldsonville,” who was “not the special deputy appointed by the Parish Democratic Executive Committee.”¹³² Although there was minimal evidence of actual ballot tampering, the court reaffirmed the *Thornhill* ruling and focused on whether there was an opportunity for ballot tampering, asserting that the burden of proof rests on the party seeking to offer the ballots into evidence to prove they have not been tampered with.¹³³

Focusing on the break in the chain of custody, the court determined that at least one of the ballot boxes’ seals had been broken, and another box’s seal was left overnight unsealed in the deputy sheriff’s home before being returned the next morning to the polling center with the key missing, which was never found.¹³⁴ Therefore, because the ballot boxes were handled by improper officials and their actions left the ballots potentially exposed to the public for

¹²⁶ *Thornhill v. Wear*, 60 So. 228, 231 (La. 1912).

¹²⁷ *Id.* at 228.

¹²⁸ *Id.*

¹²⁹ *Id.* at 231.

¹³⁰ *Id.*

¹³¹ *Kling v. De Armand*, 57 So.2d 234, 238 (La. Ct. App. 1952).

¹³² *Id.* at 235.

¹³³ *Id.* at 236. See also *McConnell v. Salmon*, 141 So. 73, 74 (La. 1932); *Welch v. Fitzgerald*, 144 So. 73 (La. Ct. App. 1932); *Hill v. Vernon Par. Democratic Exec. Comm.*, 56 So.2d 868 (La. Ct. App. 1952).

¹³⁴ *Id.* at 238.

several days, the court held that the ballot boxes that were exposed to potential tampering were to be excluded from the recount, despite the lack of evidence of actual ballot tampering.¹³⁵

In *Smith v. Kincaid*, the Kentucky Court of Appeals considered an election contest suit for the county and magisterial district officers' positions and ultimately affirmed the opportunity to tamper standard.¹³⁶ The night after the election, the ballot box keys, two of which were required to be held by election commissioners, were instead kept in the possession of the sheriff at the courthouse and at times in the same room as the ballot boxes.¹³⁷ The court found evidence that no more than 234 ballots had been tampered with.¹³⁸ However, the evidence did show that the guards engaged in heavy drinking the night after the election at the courthouse, and at one point, some guards openly brandished their knives.¹³⁹ Consequently, the guards were wandering around the courthouse all night; no one was assigned to guard the room containing the ballot boxes, and at one point, guards were actually locked out of the room by people with no right to be there.¹⁴⁰ The court thus ruled that "where ballots have been soexposed as to have offered opportunity to be tampered with, and have not been guarded with that zealous care. . . they lose their presumptive purity, and are no longer to be relied on as evidence."¹⁴¹

Similarly, in 1954, the Florida Supreme Court affirmed a trial court's exclusion of ballots in which both parties had claimed to have been tampered with.¹⁴² The plaintiff in the case, having lost the election, sought to open the ballots as evidence that he was "incorrectly deprived of 20 votes."¹⁴³ Since the plaintiff alleged that the ballots had not been correctly preserved following delivery to the Supervisor of Registration, however, the court held that the ballots had "lost their probative force and consequently could not be resorted to for the purpose of clarifying the alleged error in return."¹⁴⁴ Additionally, in 2004, an Illinois appellate court, considering the chain of custody of absentee ballots, held that the chain of custody "must be of sufficient completeness to render it improbable that the object has either been exchanged with another or subjected to contamination or tampering."¹⁴⁵ Thus, the burden of proof must establish that the ballots have been kept intact, not that they have been tampered with.¹⁴⁶ Ultimately, the evidence showed that the same ballots recorded on election night were later found in the warehouse, violating the ballot chain of custody and invalidating them.¹⁴⁷

Direct Evidence of Tampering Required

In contrast to allowing any breach in the ballot chain of custody to invalidate the votes and ultimately disenfranchise voters, some states require direct evidence of ballot tampering, as in the following two examples. In 1922, the Idaho Supreme Court held that ballots that had been exposed to tampering could still be opened and used as evidence to establish their validity, because there was insufficient evidence to support the claim that they had been

¹³⁵ *Id.*

¹³⁶ *Smith v. Kincaid*, 235 S.W.2d 62, 65 (Ky. Ct. App. 1951).

¹³⁷ *Id.* at 63.

¹³⁸ *Id.*

¹³⁹ *Id.*

¹⁴⁰ *Id.*

¹⁴¹ *Id.* at 65.

¹⁴² *Burke v. Beasley*, 75 So.2d 7, 10 (Fla. 1954).

¹⁴³ *Id.* at 8.

¹⁴⁴ *Id.*

¹⁴⁵ *Qualkinbush v. Skubisz*, 826 N.E.2d 1181, 1204 (Ill. App. Ct. 2004) (quoting *Van Hattem v. Kmart Corp.*, 719 N.E.2d 212, 223 (Ill. App. Ct. 1999)).

¹⁴⁶ *Id.*

¹⁴⁷ *Id.* at 1188.

tampered with.¹⁴⁸ Between the election and the election contest suit, ballot boxes were held by one of the election judges for four months, within the reach of multiple unauthorized people.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, other ballot boxes were kept in the sheriff's unlocked vault, where the office door remained unlocked and accessible to many authorized people.¹⁵⁰ However, despite the clear breach in the ballot chain of custody, the court found that the "care shown may be considered a reasonable and substantial compliance with the law" and that there was no direct evidence that the ballot boxes were opened.¹⁵¹ Thus, because there was no direct evidence of ballot tampering, the trial court properly opened and examined the contents of the ballot boxes.¹⁵²

Additionally, in 2026, the Michigan Court of Appeals found that the ballot chain of custody had been breached for 37 voters but ultimately prioritized the voters' "clear legal right to have them appropriately considered under the Michigan Election Law."¹⁵³ The day after the election, the Clerk discovered that 37 ballots had not been counted.¹⁵⁴ Despite never being opened, the ballots had not been tabulated and were then combined with the rest of the votes that were tabulated.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, several unauthorized personnel had entered the Clerk's office while the ballots were there, violating the ballot chain of custody.¹⁵⁶ However, Michigan law requires more evidence than just a breach in the chain of custody for ballots to be invalidated.¹⁵⁷ Thus, since there was no direct evidence of ballot tampering beyond the breach in the chain of custody, and because Michigan law prioritizes voters' right to have their ballots counted, the Michigan Court of Appeals ruled that the ballots were not invalidated.¹⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

Courts around the country have taken a wide variety of approaches to remedy chain of custody breaches in elections. Courts must balance the need to protect eligible voters who cast their ballots in accordance with the law from disenfranchisement on the one hand with protecting the integrity of elections and the reliability of election results on the other. Because of the high stakes involved in balancing these two interests, when statutory guidance is unavailable, courts are careful to weigh facts and evidence particular to each case to ensure that elections outcomes accurately reflect the will of the voters.

Part II builds upon the legal frameworks discussed in this section by examining the operational practices used by election offices to implement chain-of-custody principles in daily election administration. While this section focuses on what states require, Part II focuses on how election officials translate those requirements into practical procedures, documentation systems, security measures, and administrative controls throughout the election cycle.

¹⁴⁸ *Viel v. Summers*, 209 P. 454, 457 (Idaho 1922).

¹⁴⁹ *Id.* at 455.

¹⁵⁰ *Id.*

¹⁵¹ *Id.* at 456.

¹⁵² *Id.* at 462.

¹⁵³ *Mahmood v. City of Hamtramck*, 2026 WL 880593, 5.

¹⁵⁴ *Id.* at 1. (citing MCL § 168.814).

¹⁵⁵ *Id.*

¹⁵⁶ *Id.*

¹⁵⁷ *Id.* at 3.

¹⁵⁸ *Id.* at 6.

PART II: BEST PRACTICES FOR ELECTION CHAIN OF CUSTODY

This section translates the legal landscape described in Part I into the day-to-day operational practices election offices can use to secure ballots and equipment throughout the election cycle. It presents chain of custody not as an Election Day checklist, but as a continuous cycle of planning and execution, built on five foundational standards that apply regardless of an office's size or budget. Recommendations are offered in tiers, so that every office can identify realistic, incremental improvements suited to its own capacity and legal authority.

THE MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR A STRONG CHAIN OF CUSTODY

Chain of custody can be made high-tech with tools like barcodes, GPS, and real-time tracking. But those tools are not the baseline. The real foundation is five basic practices. Every office should be able to show them every day, whether it has one staff member or a thousand. Fit these five standards to your office, and your chain of custody will be strong.

MINIMUM STANDARD

1

Continuous logging. A chronological record (paper or digital) is opened the moment an asset is created or received, and is maintained without gaps until the asset is archived or destroyed. Incomplete paperwork is the single most common audit finding and the fastest way to lose the benefit of every other control already in place.

MINIMUM STANDARD

2

Multi-person, bipartisan execution. A team of at least two approved people handles, seals, unseals, and moves every asset. When possible, the two come from different political parties. One person acts; the second confirms. Neither works alone.

MINIMUM STANDARD

3

The 'Principle of Least Privilege' and separation of duties. Only people whose job requires it may reach storage vaults, voting equipment, and election management systems. Each user has a personal, named login. No one shares a login, on any system, at any time.

MINIMUM STANDARD

4

Dated Verification signatures. A signature is a legal statement. It means the signer looked at the asset and confirmed that the serial numbers, seal numbers, and counts match the last entry.

MINIMUM STANDARD

5

Independent review and reconciliation. Someone other than the person who filled out a form checks it for accuracy and completeness. Ballot counts are matched against the number of voters, and any difference gets a written explanation.

Everything else in this part of the report is an amplification of those five practices. The components explain what the five apply to. The principles explain why they work. The procedures explain when in the cycle each one is used.

See Section 6 for a fuller look at the 'good/better/best' approach. It shows how to apply these practices based on what your office can do.

1 | INTRODUCTION: WHY CHAIN OF CUSTODY, AND WHY NOW

Election work at every level now faces far more scrutiny than it did ten years ago. Steps that were once routine office tasks are now read aloud in court, quoted in hearings, and shared on social media within hours. In that setting, a strong chain of custody is more than a best practice. It is how an office proves what it did.

An election chain of custody is a system of processes and chronological documentation used to track and account for the custody, control, transfer, analysis, and disposition of election assets. Those assets are both physical and digital. Examples below include, but are not limited to:

- **Physical assets:** blank and voted ballots, election management systems, provisional and absentee envelopes, ballot marking devices, scanners, tabulators, electronic pollbooks, memory cards, seals, and supply bags.
- **Digital assets:** voter registration data, election management systems, ballot images, cast vote records, tabulation logs, system audit logs, and the election definition files loaded onto equipment.

Track both kinds with the same care. A memory card that cannot be accounted for is a chain of custody failure, just like a missing ballot box. It is also easier to miss.

Three objectives of a strong system

1. **Public trust and transparency.** A good system tells a clear, audit-ready story of how an election was run. Any member of the public should be able to follow the records and see where an asset was, who had it, and when it moved before, during, and after an election.
2. **Detection and remediation.** Election work relies on staff, temporary workers, vendors, postal partners, and voters. The system must help officials spot, isolate, and fix human mistakes, equipment problems, and insider threats, ideally while there is still time to act.
3. **Audit and litigation readiness.** Recounts, audits, records requests, and lawsuits all test the same paperwork. A well-run chain of custody lets an office stand up to a legal challenge instead of bargaining with one.

Threats and technology keep changing, so review the system on a set schedule, not only after something goes wrong.

The vocabulary differs. The principles do not.

Election officials often start with a disclaimer: "I don't know how they do it in the next county, but here is how we do it." The words, the structure, and the order of who touches what can differ a lot from state to state. The core principles do not differ nearly as much. Treating each office as its own island hides how much chain of custody has in common from one place to the next.

Think about how a voter casts a paper ballot. Some states use ballot stubs. In some places the voter hands the ballot to a poll worker, who drops it in. In others the voter drops it in directly. Under those differences sits the same rule: only the voter and approved election workers touch the ballot, in a watched and documented process that protects the voter's privacy and keeps the ballot secure. Counting works the same way. It may happen at the polling place or at a central site. The public may watch, or only party representatives may. But in every case the legal custodian oversees the count, and only approved people handle the materials.

This part of our report, as in the others, uses one set of terms to keep things clear. If a term is new to you, Appendix B lists the names used in other jurisdictions. We ask you to read past the words to the practice underneath.

A note on legal authority

Many practices in this part of the report are not written into state law, and that is normal. The U.S. Constitution gives election authority to state legislatures. Those legislatures pass it to state and local election offices. The day-to-day rules of custody usually come from administrative rules, a state procedures manual, or local office policy set under that authority. State election codes are often silent, partial, or inconsistent on these points. When the law is silent on a step, that silence is not a ban. See Part I of this report for more information on state statutes governing chain of custody.

Where a practice here is not required by state law, adopting it is a matter of administrative judgment, not a break from the law. Before adopting any practice in this report, review it against state code and administrative rules, check with legal counsel, and be ready to name the authority you are acting under.

2 | THE FIVE COMPONENTS OF CHAIN OF CUSTODY

Every chain of custody cycle rests on the same five components, no matter how big the office or what the state law says. They appear in the order in which they act on an asset, and the definition of chain of custody is built from them.

Component	What it means in an election office
Custody	Access control: naming the people allowed to handle a given asset. Custody takes a careful balance. Cross-train enough staff so that one absence does not stop work, but keep the number of people with vault or system access as small as the job allows.
Control	A three-tiered set of measures: Preventative controls that prevent unauthorized access, Detective controls that reveal when a breach or error has occurred, and Corrective controls that fix the problem. A seal is a detective control, not a preventative one. It does not stop a box from being opened; it shows that it was.
Transfer	The secure movement of assets between parties. This is the busiest point in an asset's life and the most likely place for a breakdown because responsibility changes hands. Every handoff needs a named giver, a named receiver, and a recorded time. Once assets return to home base, store them securely (see Custody: video surveillance, controlled access, least privilege, and access logging and monitoring).
Analysis	Risk assessment before the cycle, inspection during it, and review after the election. The goal is to confirm the controls actually worked, not just that they existed on paper.
Disposition	The final storing, keeping, and, at end of life, secure destruction or retirement of assets and records, following federal and state retention rules.

Reporting and reconciliation: continuing the cycle

Disposition ends an asset's journey, but it does not end the cycle. Reporting and reconciliation links Analysis to the next round of Planning. It means summing up how the system performed, checking that all paperwork is complete and correct, returning assets to inactive status, and holding an honest review of what to change before the next election. An office that skips this step will find the same weak spots every cycle.

3 | THE FIVE CORE PRINCIPLES

The components describe how the system is built. These five principles describe how to run it. Each one appears again in Section 5, at the point where it matters most.

Multi-person and/or bipartisan execution

Teams of at least two approved people handle and transfer sensitive items, ideally from opposing parties. The point is not to watch each other; it is that a second person changes the record. The second person is not just writing it down but confirming it. Many states require two people from opposing parties to sign custody paperwork for exactly this reason.

The 'Principle of Least Privilege'

Access to storage vaults, voting systems, and digital data is limited to a person's role, and access is removed when the role changes. Least privilege goes hand in hand with separation of duties. The person who programs the memory cards should not be the only person who checks the seals on the machines those cards go into.

Continuous logging

Start a record the moment an asset is created or received, and keep it going without a break. Missing or partial paperwork is a common audit finding, and it raises questions the office then cannot answer with records. A gap in a log is not a small slip; it is the exact thing a hostile review looks for.

Verification signatures

Signatures act as legal certification that an official performed a visual inspection and confirmed that serial numbers and seals match the preceding entries. Training should be explicit on this point: staff and poll workers must understand that, for example, signing a form to a seal number they did not read themselves is a false statement, not a shortcut.

Independent review and reconciliation

Someone other than the person who created a form or log must check it for accuracy and completeness. Ballot counts must be matched against the number of voters, with a written note explaining any difference. Reconciliation is the bridge between running the election and certifying it. It turns raw paperwork into a reliable account of what happened. An office that never checks its own paperwork lets small mistakes grow into audit findings. An office that matches its numbers every time builds an audit-ready trail that backs up the whole process.

4 | CHAIN OF CUSTODY IS A CONTINUOUS CYCLE, NOT AN ELECTION DAY CHECKLIST

The most common mistake in chain of custody planning is treating it as separate phases tied to the election calendar, something that starts when ballots are printed and ends when results are certified. In practice, the chain never opens or closes. Equipment sits in a warehouse eleven months a year, and that storage is a link in the chain. Records kept after certification are part of the chain. A special election called on three weeks' notice meets an office in whatever custody shape it was already in.

The Carter Center makes this point in its guide for observing risk-limiting audits. It argues that the audit works best when seen as one part of a longer chain of events. Those events include choices about voting options and sites, how ballots are packaged, how workers are trained, how custody is documented, how ballots are secured, and how the office reaches the public. What a jurisdiction does before, during, and after voting shapes both the quality of the audit and whether the public accepts the result.

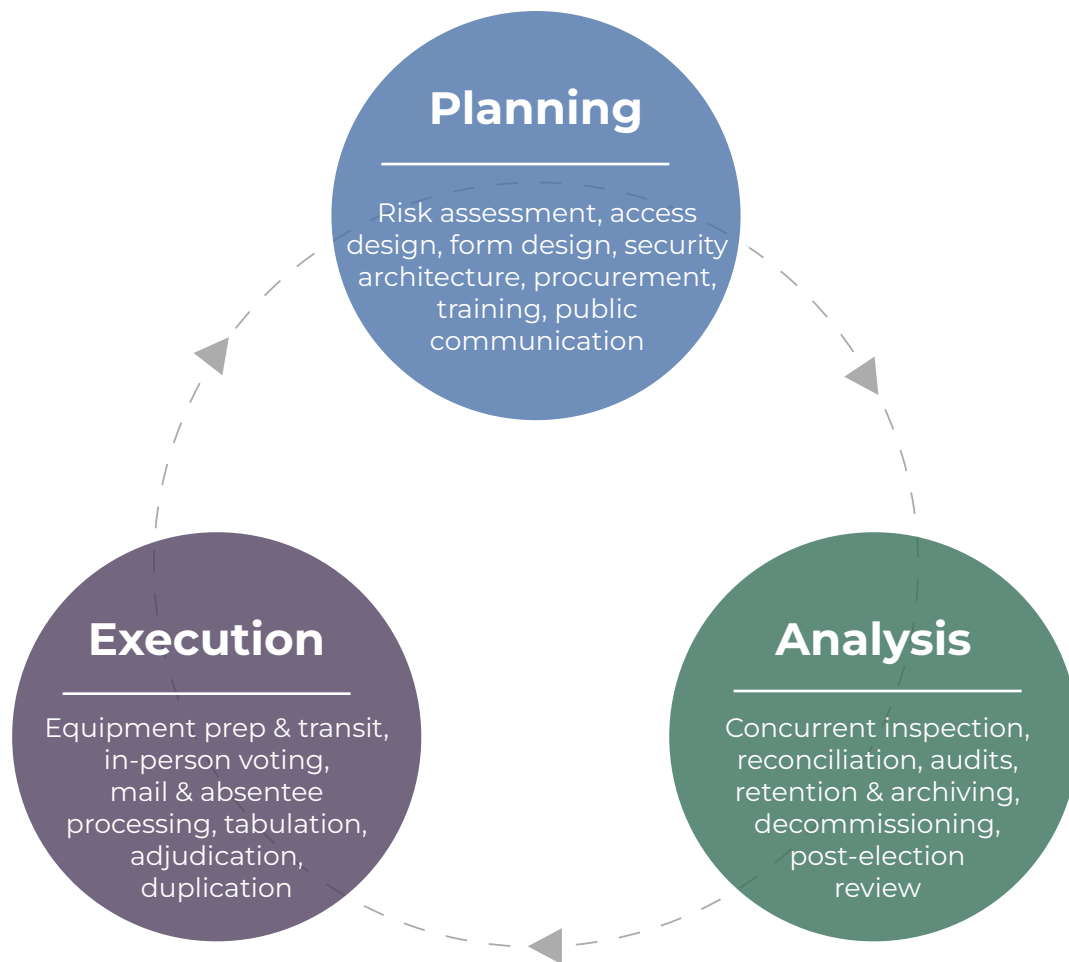
That is the core idea of this report. An audit cannot create trust that the past twelve months of custody did not earn. If the paper trail cannot be verified, the audit cannot verify the winner. It can only confirm that the ballots in the box match the machine that counted those ballots.

From phases to procedures

For that reason, this report does not use phases. It uses three procedures that repeat, and an office moves through them again and again, often for more than one election at a time:

Procedure	What it covers	Components applied	Core principle in focus
Planning	Risk assessment, access design, form design, security architecture, procurement, training, and public communication.	Custody · Control	The 'Principle of Least Privilege' and separation of duties
Execution	Equipment preparation and transit, in-person voting, mail and absentee processing, tabulation, adjudication, and duplication.	Custody · Transfer · Control	Multi-person, bipartisan execution and verification signatures
Analysis	Concurrent inspection, reconciliation, audits, retention and archiving, decommissioning, and the post-election review that feeds the next planning cycle.	Analysis · Disposition	Continuous logging; Independent review and reconciliation

The three procedures form a cycle, not a line. Planning sets what Execution can do. Execution creates the record that Analysis needs. Analysis drives the next round of Planning. An office running back-to-back primaries may be executing one election, analyzing another, and planning a third all at once.



5 | PLANNING, EXECUTION, AND ANALYSIS

The sections below sort the work into the three procedures from Section 2. Each one opens with the components it uses and the principle it leans on most. Tools, forms, and security steps are described where they are actually used, not gathered in a separate list. A full list of forms appears in Appendix A.

5.1 Planning

PROCEDURE SUMMARY

Components applied: Custody · Control

Core principle in focus: The 'Principle of Least Privilege' and separation of duties

When: Continuously as threats, staff, and equipment change. Also occurs prior to the start of voting in a specific election.

Planning is where you design, build, and test the chain of custody system. Most failures that show up in Execution trace back to Planning: a form that does not capture a seal number, a role with more access than it needs, or a step that the people who must follow it never tested.

Risk assessment and procedure design

Run a documented risk assessment to find weak spots in custody, control, and transfer. This is the time to write or revise forms, test the workflow with the people who will fill them out, and set clear expectations for staff and volunteers. Apply two tests to every form:

- Can it be completed correctly by a tired temporary worker in poor lighting without asking a question?
- Does every field help a later reconciliation or audit? Fields that serve no purpose get filled in carelessly, and that carelessness spreads to the fields that count.

Publish written chain of custody procedures for the public before every election, then review and revise them afterward based on what was learned. Use judgment about how much detail to share. Do not publish delivery routes or access codes. Publishing the procedures ahead of time also does communications work: it puts the office's account of its own process on the record before anyone else offers one.

Designing custody: access and credentials

Custody is set here, before any asset exists. Limit access to storage vaults and election management systems by role. Write it down in an access list, and review that list on a schedule, not just when someone leaves.

MINIMUM STANDARD 3

3

The 'Principle of Least Privilege' and separation of duties. Only people whose job requires it may reach storage vaults, voting equipment, and election management systems. Each user has a personal, named login. No one shares a login, on any system, at any time.

Security foundations established during planning

Physical and cyber security foundations are laid here, not improvised later:

- **Air-gapping.** Keep voting systems air-gapped. Never put removable media that has touched a public network into a closed voting system. Where data must be transferred, consider write-once media such as non-reusable jump drives.
- **Physical layering.** Layer vault and warehouse access (perimeter, room, container), and log entry at each layer. Work with state and local authorities on assessments.
- **End-of-life planning.** Decide during Planning how equipment will be retired, so disposal is not rushed under pressure years later.
- **Observer boundaries.** Set clear, marked lines from which the public can watch each step without getting in the way. Transparency planned ahead is a security control. Transparency improvised on Election Day is a crowd problem.

Procurement of seals and logistics supplies

Buy seals and supplies during Planning, because how they are bought is itself a control. Most tamper-evident seals are sold to the public. An office that buys one type in bulk creates a lasting weak spot: anyone can buy the same seal, and nothing tells one election's seals from the next.

- **Rotate seal type and color for each election and** add office-specific customization such as county name and election date.
- **Match the seal to the asset:** serialized zip-ties for supply bags and ballot transfer bags; padlock seals for transit cages and carts; void-pattern tape seals for USB and media ports; barcoded seals where the office has scanning capacity.
- **Buy in cycle-sized quantities** and log seal serial ranges on receipt, so an unaccounted-for seal can be identified as easily as an unaccounted-for ballot.
- **Color-coded mail trays and tear-resistant bags** let staff see a batch's exact stage from across a crowded room. This prevents the most common mail error: a batch going back into a step it already finished.

Technology decisions made in advance

Where resources allow, two technologies strengthen transfer records. Choose them during Planning, not in the middle of a cycle:

- **Hierarchical barcode inventory (“box in a box”).** Put barcodes on equipment and containers. One scan of a transport cage returns the serial numbers of every scanner, ballot marking device, pollbook, and supply kit inside. That turns a twenty-line handwritten list into one scan and one signature.
- **GPS tracking on transport cages.** GPS units on transport cages record a live, saved travel history from warehouse to polling place. This is one of the few controls that answers a specific public claim: that a vehicle went somewhere it should not have. In a smaller, less resourced office, mileage logs could be used to reasonably suggest that a direct route to/from was taken.
- **RFID tag transponder.** Fairfax County, VA recently won an Election Assistance Commission [Clearinghouse Award](#) (“Clearie”) for an innovative [new tool](#) utilizing RFID (radio frequency identification) and GPS capture to digitally track assets throughout the chain of custody allowing officials to monitor equipment deployment in real time and immediately detect anomalies.

Capacity, timing, and setting the tone

Planning is also where practical limits are realized. Run time studies to find bottlenecks before they happen, and staff against them. Plan for accessible electronic pollbooks and ballot marking devices so voters with disabilities can vote on their own and in private; fixes improvised on Election Day create handling no one wrote down. Set the tone from the top: leaders should tell staff, poll workers, candidates, party representatives, and voters what chain of custody looks like in this jurisdiction.

STATE EXAMPLE: IOWA

Iowa's structured memory card logs (commonly referred to as [Form A](#) and [Form B](#)) are a strong model for tracking digital assets from the moment they are programmed. Each log records the serial number of the memory card, the specific machine it is installed in, the tamper-evident seal number used to lock it, and the signatures of the officials who programmed and installed it. The design point worth copying is that the card, the machine, the seal, and the humans are captured in a single row so a later discrepancy in any one of the four immediately identifies the other three.

Pre-election activity within Planning. As the pre-election part of the cycle nears, Planning shades into readiness work that still belongs here: checking blank ballot stock against the printer's manifest on delivery, setting up media drives with dedicated administrator accounts, and running logic and accuracy (L&A) testing. L&A testing is itself a custody event. The equipment is opened, run, and resealed, and a new seal number must be recorded before it goes back to storage.

5.2 Execution

PROCEDURE SUMMARY

Components applied: Custody · Transfer · Control

Core principles in focus: Multi-person and bipartisan execution; verification signatures

When: From equipment deployment through tabulation and adjudication to placing back in storage

Execution covers sending out, using, and bringing back election assets. It carries the most risk for a built-in reason: assets leave the direct control of election experts and pass through temporary poll workers, delivery vendors, postal workers, and voters. That is why the tools and security controls cluster here.

Equipment preparation and transit

When memory cards are programmed and machines are moved, logs must track them without a break. The Iowa memory card logs from Section 5.1 carry into this step: the seal number written down at programming is the same number a poll worker checks at the polling place, and catching a mismatch between the two is the whole point of the record.

During transit, lock equipment in transit carts or mobile mail cages with padlock seals and serialized zip-ties. Record the seal numbers at load-out, and have the receiving team check them at delivery. If the office uses barcodes, the cage scan replaces the handwritten list. If it uses GPS, save the travel history with the transfer form. At least two staff of different parties should witness any move, and an inventory and custody record should be taken both before and after.

Opening the polls: the two-person integrity protocol

Before polls open, poll workers run steps to confirm no votes are stored in equipment memory. Set up the equipment as a team, so one person's mistake or missed step cannot slip through:

- **One official reads** the procedure aloud, step by step.
- **A second official performs** the physical actions: breaking seals, powering equipment, printing tapes.
- **A third official (often the manager) records** the data on the recap forms as it is read back.

The initialization sequence itself should be fixed and documented:

1. **Seal verification.** Break the seal on each unit. Check the unit's serial number and the seal number against the Touchscreen Recap Sheet before moving on. Confirming that a seal is there is not enough; it must be confirmed that its number matches the number recorded when it was applied.
2. **Zero tape.** Print a zero tape from every polling place scanner. This is the foundational audit proof that no votes were pre-loaded.
3. **Documentation.** The poll manager retains the zero tape and records the zero count on the Scanner/Ballot Box Recap Form, along with the L&A seal number, ballot box seal number, and emergency bin seal number.

MINIMUM STANDARD 2

- 2 Multi-person, bipartisan execution. Opening and closing show best why two people are the minimum, not a luxury. In the reader-doer-recorder setup, no one person can both do an action and be the only source proving it was done right.

Active voting and precinct accountability

During voting, chain of custody is mostly about documentation, and recap sheets are the tool. Poll workers record opening counts and seal numbers in the morning, then recheck counts and seals before closing. That gives a clear snapshot of the day and answers the key question: does the number of checked-in voters match the number of cast ballots? A ballot recap sheet extends this to the full trail, covering ballots printed on ballot marking devices, emergency ballots, spoiled ballots, and total issued against total cast.

Mail and absentee ballot processing

Mail ballots may be the hardest custody problem an office faces, because for part of the trip the ballot is legitimately out of the office's hands. The goal is a closed-loop system that tracks the ballot from the printer to the voter and back.

1. **Individual identification through the mail stream.** The standard tool is the USPS Intelligent Mail barcode (IMb), a 65-bar code that lets officials track a ballot through the mail. Add a Service Type Identifier (STID), a three-digit code inside the IMb that marks the piece as an election ballot. That lets both USPS and the office tell ballots from regular mail and spot delays early. Pair the digital tracking with visual cues: use the official Election Mail logo and green Tag 191 on mail trays so postal staff know to move them first.
2. **Tracking platforms.** An in-house tracking system may be developed, but most jurisdictions use an existing platform or work through their ballot printer. Third-party trackers tie together the office, the printer, and USPS to show status from mailing through final acceptance. A third-party tracker costs money, so budget for it during Planning.

3. **Voter-facing tracking and curing.** Tracking is not just an internal control. Voters can sign up for text, email, or voice alerts about their ballot's status. That cuts calls asking whether a ballot arrived and frees staff to process ballots. If a ballot has a problem, such as a missing signature, the system can alert the voter with steps to fix, or cure, it before the deadline. More states now offer statewide ballot tracking, and several have recently moved to require it.
4. **Secure intake and processing.** When ballots arrive, the physical chain starts again. Teams of two or more, ideally from opposing parties, collect ballots from drop boxes and from USPS. Envelopes are date-stamped and barcode-scanned to give voter credit on receipt. If available, run envelopes through a high-speed sorter to capture a signature image (if required) and sort by precinct or ballot style; two-party teams then compare that signature against the voter's record. Open ballots in equal-sized batches with a tracking sheet, and keep a master log of how many arrived, how they were handled, and the final count of scanned versus challenged ballots.

STATE EXAMPLE: GEORGIA

Georgia's Drop Box Ballot Transfer Form is a good model for a one-page transfer form. It requires the collection team's signatures, the time of collection, the total ballots retrieved, and the signature of the registrar who receives them at the central office. It records both ends of the handoff on one sheet, and that is what makes it auditable. A form signed only by the person handing off proves something left, not that it arrived.

MINIMUM STANDARD 4

4

Verification signatures. Every transfer form should have a named giver and a named receiver. Each signs for a specific count and a specific seal number at a specific time. If someone can fill out the form truthfully without ever looking at the asset, redesign the form.

Tabulation, adjudication, and duplication

During tabulation, electronic systems must use separate, non-shared logins. That builds a trail of which team made each voter-intent call during adjudication. This is where the least-privilege choices from Planning hold or fail. An adjudication log that traces back to a shared account is not an audit trail.

Copying damaged or unreadable ballots is the most closely watched hand process in tabulation, and it needs the tightest documentation of anything in this section.

STATE EXAMPLE: COLORADO

When a ballot is damaged or torn and must be copied, Colorado requires resolution boards to mark both the original and the new copy with a matching number (for example, "Orig 0001" and "Dupe 0001"). A running written log lists the ballot numbers, the date, the reason for the copy, and the printed names and signatures of the two-party board members. The matching numbers let any later auditor pair a copy with its original and check the copy on their own.

5.3 Analysis

PROCEDURE SUMMARY

Components applied: Analysis · Disposition

Core principle in focus: Continuous logging

When: Concurrently during the election, immediately after it, and continuously through the retention period.

Analysis is where the office learns whether its controls worked, and where the record it built is finally used. In most offices it is also the step most likely to be cut short when staff are worn out. That is exactly why Analysis should be scheduled, staffed, and practiced during Planning, rather than treat it as an afterthought around certification.

Concurrent analysis: inspection while it still matters

Not all Analysis waits until the end. Check things during the election, too. Spot-check that recap sheets are being filled in as the day goes on. Confirm that seal numbers on returned equipment match the deployment log, and that a tracking sheet rides with every batch. These checks catch errors while there is still time to fix them and while the people who made them can still explain what happened. A mismatch found on Tuesday afternoon is an operations issue. The same mismatch found in December is a controversy.

Reconciliation and independent review

After the election, full reconciliation compares, at a minimum, the number of counted votes against the number of voters who voted. It also compares total ballots issued against total ballots cast, spoiled ballots, and unvoted ballots, precinct by precinct. Two rules govern this work:

- **Review by a different person.** Completed forms are reviewed for completeness and accuracy by someone other than the individual who completed them.
- **Written explanation of variances.** Where numbers do not match, the office documents the variance and attempts to explain the cause. Most differences have ordinary causes, such as a spoiled ballot logged in the wrong column or a voter who checked in and left. Written down at the time, they are routine details that become part of the election summary. Undocumented, they become the evidence in someone else's argument.

MINIMUM STANDARD 1 & 5

1&5

Verification signatures. Every transfer form should have a named giver and a named receiver. Each signs for a specific count and a specific seal number at a specific time. If someone can fill out the form truthfully without ever looking at the asset, redesign the form.

Audits and Chain of Custody

Strong audits, including risk-limiting audits (RLAs), are key tools for election integrity, and they rest on a verified paper trail and chain of custody. An RLA is a powerful check on the count, comparing hand counts against machine

data. It works best when paired with careful custody practices. By verifying the paper trail every time, offices get the most out of the audit.

The Carter Center's review of Georgia's 2020 statewide hand tally offers useful lessons for audit rules. It found that auditors do better when they check not just that a container is sealed, but that the seal number matches the record made when the container was first sealed. Making this two-step check, seal condition and seal number, a formal, initialed step in the audit builds a stronger and harder-to-dispute process.

The Carter Center's wider principles for post-election audits say these steps work best when they rest on clear legal rules set in advance, stay strictly impartial, and build secure chain of custody rules into the audit's core.

STATE EXAMPLE: VERMONT

Vermont's chain of custody [log sheets](#) for vote tabulators and memory cards are a strong post-election model. Each log records equipment moving in and out of the secure vault: the date, the time, the reason for the move, and the exact tamper-proof seal numbers, backed by two officials' signatures. Because the log is built around the vault, not around one election, it keeps running between elections, which is just what a continuous cycle needs.

Retention, archiving, and disposition

Store physical assets and records in sealed containers, record the seal numbers, and keep them under the same access controls used during the election. Federal law requires keeping records for federal elections for twenty-two months. State periods vary and can be longer for some records. Confirm both, and remember that lawsuits or records requests can extend how long they must be kept.

Disposition also covers equipment at the end of life. Before old hardware is retired, sold, or thrown out, wipe its data securely. Document it as carefully as any other transfer: serial number, method, date, and the signatures of the two people who did it.

6 | OPERATIONAL CONSTRAINTS AND MANAGING LIMITATIONS

Chain of custody is not unique to elections. What is unique is that elections are not a closed system. Banks, labs, and evidence rooms control everyone who touches the asset. Election offices cannot. At some point, secure assets pass to voters who may not follow directions, to poll workers with limited training, and to outside delivery vendors. Every practice in this report has to work within that reality.

Resource limitations

- **Financial constraints.** Match the level and number of controls to the office's resources. Where funds are tight, put low-cost, high-impact documentation ahead of technology.
- **Human capacity.** Office size sets how far duties can be separated and analyzed. A three-person office cannot split every task, but it can still make sure no one both does and verifies the same act. Use two-party poll workers, board members, or staff from another department for the verifying role.

A “good/better/best” approach

Do not let perfect be the enemy of good. Where resources are tight, the trap to avoid is doing nothing. Use the strongest controls possible, and focus on steady recording and reporting, the base of accountability. The table below is a starting point for scaling up.

Practice	Good	Better	Best
Seals	Numbered seals; numbers recorded by hand on the transfer form and verified at receipt.	Seal type and color rotated each election; office-specific customization; seal serial ranges logged on receipt.	Barcoded seals scanned into an inventory system; automatic flagging of out-of-range serials.
Transport	Two-person delivery with a signed transfer form showing count, time, and seal numbers.	Bipartisan team; locked transit cart or cage with padlock seals; receiving-site verification logged.	GPS-tracked cage with hierarchical barcode manifest; archived travel history retained with the transfer record.
Mail tracking	IMb with an election-mail Service Type Identifier; Tag 191 and Election Mail logo on trays.	In-house or third-party tracking platform with voter notifications; proactive monitoring of delivery delays.	Closed-loop tracking from printer to acceptance, integrated with automated curing outreach.
Logging	Paper log with required fields, reviewed by a second person before filing.	Structured digital form with mandatory fields that cannot be submitted incomplete.	Integrated system with real-time dashboards and exception alerts for missing entries.
Access control	Key log and vault sign-in sheet; individual named credentials for all systems.	Badge access with an audit trail; documented access list reviewed each cycle.	Badge plus camera coverage; scheduled access reviews with automatic deprovisioning on role change.
Public transparency	Written procedures published before each election; observation permitted where required by law.	Standing invitations to observe testing and processing; pre-election briefings for media and parties.	Published ballot-journey diagram; routine after-action reports released every cycle.

Navigating timing challenges

Short gaps between elections sharply raise the risk that set procedures get skipped, not out of bad faith, but because the last cycle's Analysis work and the next cycle's Planning work pull on the same people at once.

- **Known timing.** Consecutive events such as a primary followed by a runoff require strict scheduling built backward from the second election's deadlines.
- **Unknown timing.** Special elections often come with little notice and upset set routines. Whatever custody shape the office is already in is what it will run the special election with.

Test procedures in a practice run, especially before back-to-back elections. Measure two things offices rarely check: how fast post-election steps can be finished, and how fast a new chain of custody cycle can start from a cold stop.

BEST PRACTICES APPENDIX A: MODEL FORMS AND REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

The forms below are the main tools for documenting how election materials move. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission and CISA publish sample forms and checklists that offices can adapt. The state examples in Section 5 are the practical models this report suggests reviewing.

A.1 Core chain of custody forms

Form	Function	Key data captured
Touchscreen Recap Sheet	Verifies the integrity of ballot marking devices and battery backups at open and close.	Unit serial numbers; opening and closing case seal numbers; side compartment seal numbers (accessories, batteries, election data).
Scanner / Ballot Box Recap Form	Documents the security of the ballot receptacle and L&A status.	L&A seal number; ballot box seal number; emergency bin seal number; opening and closing counts; zero tape retained.
E-Pollbook Recap Sheet	Reconciles electronic check-ins against paper records.	E-pollbook check-ins vs. paper supplemental numbered list; wait time tracking; device seal numbers.
Ballot Recap Sheet	Provides the grand reconciliation of the precinct audit trail.	Total ballots printed on BMDs; emergency ballots; spoiled ballots; provisional ballots; total issued vs. total cast.
Chain of Custody Form: Transfer of Election Results	Documents the handoff of sensitive digital media and voted ballots.	Memory card serial numbers; container seal numbers; time of surrender and receipt; signatures of both parties.
Drop Box Ballot Transfer Form	Manages the chain for ballots retrieved from drop boxes.	Date and time of collection; specific ballot count; seal numbers applied; signatures of the two-person collection team and of the receiving registrar.
Memory Card Log (Iowa Form A / Form B model)	Tracks programmed digital media from initialization through installation.	Card serial number; machine it is installed in; tamper-evident seal number; signatures of programming and installing officials.
Vault In/Out Log (Vermont model)	Tracks equipment movement into and out of secure storage year-round.	Date; time; purpose of transfer; tamper-proof seal numbers; signatures of two election officials.
Ballot Duplication Log (Colorado model)	Documents replication of damaged or unreadable ballots.	Matched original and duplicate numbers (e.g., Orig 0001 / Dupe 0001); date; reason for duplication; printed names and signatures of bipartisan board members.
Batch Tracking Sheet	Follows a mail ballot batch through extraction, review, and scanning.	Batch number; arrival count; processing stage; scanned vs. challenged counts; staff initials at each stage.
After-Action Report	Documents the performance of the chain of custody system after every election.	What worked; incidents and their resolution; forms completed incorrectly; controls skipped; specific changes for the next cycle.

A.2 Security and logistics tools

Tool	Use	Data to capture
Tamper-evident security seals	Secure ballot boxes, scanner cases, supply bags, equipment cabinets, transit cages, and USB or media ports using serialized zip-ties, padlock seals, void-pattern tape, or barcoded seals.	Serial numbers; seal type and color for the cycle; office customization (county name, election date); application and removal times with signatures.
Systemized logistics supplies	Visually designate ballot processing stages and secure transit using color-coded mail trays, tear-resistant bags, and lockable transit carts.	Batch status and stage designation; transit contents; custody record for each movement.
Hierarchical barcode inventory	"Box in a box" structure: one scan of a transport cage returns the serial numbers of everything inside it.	Container ID; nested asset serial numbers; scan timestamps and scanning users.
GPS tracking units	Attached to transport cages to capture real-time and archived travel history from warehouse to polling place.	Departure and arrival times; route history; deviation alerts.
Mail ballot tracking (IMb + STID)	Individual identification of each outbound and inbound ballot through the postal stream.	Intelligent Mail barcode; election-mail Service Type Identifier; scan events; delivery exception flags.

PROCUREMENT REMINDER

Because most security seals are commercially available, avoid bulk purchasing a single type. Rotate seal types and colors each election and introduce office-specific customizations so that an unauthorized seal cannot be quietly substituted into the chain.

A.3 When Authorities Request Election Records: Resources for Election Officials and their Counsel

To ensure preparedness for external causes that could affect chain of custody, including law enforcement requests, here are resources to share with legal counsel:

- [Election Related Search Warrants](#) (August 2026) by Justin Levitt and John Kellar, examines reasonableness measures in case of a warrant to seize election materials while election results are still pending.
- [Election Law Information Resources](#) (June 2026) by the Edley Center on Law and Democracy, U.C. Berkeley Law School, considers how warrants for election materials impact chain of custody and modifications to minimize disruption.
- [How Election Officials Respond to Law Enforcement Requests for Access to Election Equipment and Materials](#) (February 2026) by Gowri Ramachandran and Marina Pino, Brennan Center for Justice provides information and context on how to respond lawfully and safeguard against interference.
- [A Judicial Guide to Search Warrants Seeking Election Materials](#) (September 2026) by The Safeguarding Democracy Project, UCLA School of Law provides guidance to help judicial officers evaluate warrant applications seeking voting materials.

BEST PRACTICES APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY OF CHAIN OF CUSTODY TERMINOLOGY

Election terms vary a lot by state, and the same item may carry three or four names across places. This report lists a standard term in the first column and its meaning in the second. The third column lists common names that may be seen elsewhere. The definitions follow common usage and the EAC Glossary of Election Terminology, which holds about 1,300 terms and is the best guide for translating across states. As the EAC notes, terms and procedures vary by place, so always defer to state and local officials when a local term differs from a national one.

Term	Definition	Also called
Adjudication	Review of a ballot the scanner could not interpret, to determine voter intent.	Voter intent review; resolution; vote review
After-action report	A post-election review documenting how the process performed, what went wrong, and what will change.	Post-election review; lessons learned; post-mortem
Air gap	Physical isolation of a system from any public or unsecured network.	Isolated network; standalone system
Ballot accounting	Tracking the number of ballots at each stage of the ballot lifecycle.	Ballot reconciliation; ballot balancing
Ballot manifest	A record of how ballots are organized and stored, identifying each container and the ballots in it. Required to draw an audit sample.	Batch manifest; ballot inventory
Ballot marking device (BMD)	Equipment that a voter uses to make selections and that produces a marked paper ballot.	Touchscreen; ExpressVote; ICX; accessible voting unit; (AVU)
Canvass	The official process of accounting for all ballots and producing certified results.	Official count; certification process
Cast vote record (CVR)	The electronic record of the selections on an individual ballot as interpreted by the tabulator.	CVR; ballot record
Chain of custody	The processes and chronological documentation recording the custody, control, transfer, analysis, and disposition of election assets.	Custody record; ballot security documentation
Curing	The process by which a voter corrects a deficiency (commonly a missing or mismatched signature) on a returned mail ballot.	Ballot cure; signature cure; deficiency notice
Custodian	The official legally responsible for election materials at a given stage.	Legal custodian; officer in charge of elections; county recorder; registrar; clerk
Drop box	A secure receptacle for voters to return voted mail ballots.	Secure ballot return location; ballot drop location
Duplication	Creating a replacement ballot that reproduces the voter's marks when the original cannot be scanned.	Remake; replication; reconstruction; transcription
Electronic pollbook	A digital list of registered voters used to check voters in at a voting location.	E-pollbook; EPB; Poll Pad; electronic poll list
Election management system (EMS)	The software used to define the election, program equipment, and consolidate results.	EMS; election definition system

Term	Definition	Also called
Logic and accuracy testing	Pre-election testing confirming equipment correctly records and tallies votes.	L&A testing; public test; accuracy test; pre-election testing
Mail ballot	A ballot delivered to and returned by a voter outside a voting location.	Absentee ballot; early ballot (AZ); vote-by-mail (VBM); mail-in ballot
Poll worker	A person appointed to administer voting at a voting location.	Officer of election (VA); judge of elections (PA); election judge; election inspector; poll manager; precinct official
Provisional ballot	A ballot cast when a voter's eligibility cannot be confirmed at the time of voting, held pending review.	Affidavit ballot (NY); challenged ballot (GA, NH); conditional ballot
Recap sheet	A precinct-level form reconciling counts and seal numbers at open and close.	Certificate of return; poll closing report; tally sheet; statement of votes
Reconciliation	Comparing ballots issued, cast, and counted against voter credits, with an explanation of any variance.	Balancing; ballot accounting
Risk-limiting audit (RLA)	A post-election audit comparing a statistically drawn hand count of paper ballots against machine results, with a defined limit on the risk of confirming a wrong outcome.	RLA; statistical audit
Tabulator	Equipment that reads and counts marked paper ballots.	Scanner; precinct count optical scanner (PCOS); central count scanner; DS200
Tamper-evident seal	A uniquely numbered device that reveals whether a container or port has been opened.	Security seal; numbered seal; zip-tie seal
Voting location	The physical site at which voters cast ballots.	Polling place; precinct; vote center; voting center
Zero tape	A printed report from a tabulator before voting begins showing that no votes are stored.	Zero report; opening report; zeroing tape

BEST PRACTICES APPENDIX C: SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

This appendix lists the operational and standards references behind this report. Statutory and regulatory citations are compiled in the companion legal review (Part I).

Standards and guidance

- **U.S. Election Assistance Commission**, [Chain of Custody Best Practices \(2021\)](#). Best practices, checklists, and four sample chain of custody forms (precinct equipment and ballot certification; electronic pollbook; tabulator closing; early voting BMD), plus chain of custody infographics.
- **U.S. Election Assistance Commission**, [Glossaries of Election Terminology](#). Approximately 1,300 terms used in U.S. election administration.
- **CISA**, [Chain of Custody Best Practices](#). Companion checklists and sample forms.
- **Center for Internet Security / EI-ISAC**, [Election Security Spotlight: Chain of Custody](#). Concise treatment of digital as well as physical custody.

- **The Elections Group**, [Chain of Custody resource series](#), including step-by-step drop box retrieval guidance.
- **U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence**, [Standards for Election Excellence](#). Voluntary, nonpartisan standards developed with local election officials; the Secure Ballot Management, Physical Security, Cybersecurity, and Tabulation Audits standards are the most directly relevant.
- **U.S. Digital Response / U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence**, [Drop box chain of custody tool](#). A digital replacement for paper drop box custody records.

Audits and the continuous cycle

- **The Carter Center**, [Risk-Limiting Audits: A Guide for Election Observation Efforts](#). The source of this report's framing of custody as one element in a continuous sequence of electoral events.
- **The Carter Center**, [Principles for Transparency and Accountability in Post-Election Audits](#). Includes the requirement for secure chain of custody rules for all ballots and sensitive materials.
- **The Carter Center**, [The Georgia Risk-Limiting Audit / Hand Tally \(2021\)](#). Observation findings on seal verification practice during audits.
- **Citizens for Election Integrity Minnesota and Verified Voting**, [Coordinating Audits and Recounts to Strengthen Election Verification \(2022\)](#). Guidance on the chain of custody considerations that strengthen post-election audit and recount procedures.

State practices referenced

The following are cited in this report as operational models rather than as legal requirements. The legal status of each, and whether comparable requirements appear in statute or in administrative guidance, is addressed in the companion legal review.

- **Colorado**: Resolution board procedures for ballot duplication, including matched original and duplicate numbering and a continuous signed log.
- **Georgia**: Precinct recap sheets for touchscreens, scanners, and poll pads; Drop Box Ballot Transfer Form; pre-opening zeroing procedures.
- **Iowa**: Memory card logs (Form A / Form B model) for programmed digital media linked [here](#).
- **Vermont**: Chain of custody log sheets for vote tabulators and memory cards.
- **Fairfax County, Virginia**: Asset-tracking approach documented in the county's "[Security Built, Not Bought](#)."

PART III: COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING

This section builds on the legal landscape in Part I and the technical guidance in Part II to equip election officials on how to communicate plainly about their own chain of custody practices. From building public trust year-round to responding when something goes wrong, this guidance should be used as a set of building blocks, tailored to the jurisdiction, audience, and the actual processes in place. A social media toolkit with downloadable graphics is included at the end of the section.

1 | PREPARE YEAR ROUND, BEFORE ANY ELECTION

Long before an election draws scrutiny, election offices can build the public into the Planning outlined in Part II to make transparency and proactive responses to any potential errors routine rather than improvised. Follow these four key practices:

1. Make public access a habit, not an exception

- Put public-facing activity on the same calendar as logic and accuracy testing.
- Offer standing invitations to the public, candidates, party representatives, and local media to observe testing, warehouse operations, and ballot processing to establish familiarity with the process before it is under pressure.
- Hold pre-election briefings that guide stakeholders through how ballots and equipment are tracked, so the media and party representatives start from an accurate baseline.

2. Practice plain, direct communication now, before it is tested

- Publish the chain in plain language. A simple diagram of the ballot's journey, posted publicly, does more for public understanding than the procedures manual it summarizes.
- Describe all of your processes and any potential break in plain simple language. See Section 6 for voter-ready examples.
- Introduce the people doing the work, the local election workers checking seals, signing forms, and working in bipartisan pairs, so the public associates the process with people they know in their community, not with an abstract or bureaucratic system. Familiarity built during calm periods is what makes the process credible during a crisis.

3. Have a response plan ready

- Identify a crisis team and approved roles and responsibilities, including the primary spokesperson.
- Gather contact information for legal counsel and any outside support before it is needed.
- Draft holding statements, templates, and sample talking points that can be adapted quickly. Bring legal counsel and communications staff into any crisis incident from the beginning.

4. Always provide an after-action report. The most useful tool an office can borrow from emergency management is the after-action report. Produce one every election, not just the difficult ones.

2 | AFTER-ACTION REPORT ESSENTIALS

- **Make the after-action report a routine process.** Offices that do this consistently avoid the impression that they only report when something went wrong. [Virginia](#) and [Pima County, AZ](#) show what routine reporting looks like in practice.
- **Capture operational detail while it's fresh.** Memory of specific forms, timing, and decisions fade fast. Recording it immediately preserves the detail needed for real process improvement, not just a general impression of how things went.
- **Cover what worked, what was slow, and what broke.** Specifically: which forms were completed incorrectly and why, which controls were skipped under time pressure, and what will change before the next election. This is what turns the report into a tool rather than a formality.
- **Give the office a standing, familiar vehicle for disclosure.** Because the report already exists as a routine practice, surfacing a problem doesn't itself become the news. The disclosure is expected, not exceptional.
- **Use it to reinforce the people behind the work.** Elections are administered by people. Small errors occur in every large administrative undertaking. The value of a chain of custody system is that it catches them and the after-action report is where that gets demonstrated with specifics.
- **Translate findings into concrete changes.** The output isn't the report itself, but a specific list of updates to forms, training, staffing, and procurement that carries into the next planning cycle.
- **When time is short, capture now and review later.** If a full review isn't possible before the next election begins, record findings immediately in whatever rough form is available, and schedule the full review. Details won't survive the next cycle in anyone's memory.
- **Use an established template as a starting point.** The Election Assistance Commission's after-action report template [available here](#) offers a structured, sector-specific format offices can adapt.

3 | COMMUNICATING WHEN CHAIN OF CUSTODY IS TESTED OR BROKEN

Aristotle is often credited with the phrase "Nature abhors a vacuum," and this old adage has never rung truer than in the information age. When information is missing, someone will rush to fill the gap with something, anything, to satisfy the public. Failing to address an incident promptly leaves room for lies to take hold, and those falsehoods are hard to counter once they spread.

Follow these five straightforward practices when chain of custody is broken:

1. **Establish the facts before going public.** Determine what the documentation shows, what is being corrected, and what remains unknown, before making any public statement. Do not speculate, overstate, or downplay what happened.
2. **Rely on your records.** Because chain of custody produces a documented trail, that same documentation is your best tool for explaining, correcting, and defending the process. Stick to what the record shows.
3. **Isolate the issue from the narrative.** A break in the process is not the same as a breakdown in an election. For example, a gap in documentation or a broken seal is a signal to investigate, not proof that a vote was changed or the election was compromised. Communicate that distinction early.
4. **Keep it transparent.** Involve officials from both parties and representatives from independent candidates in both the internal investigation and the external communication, so the resolution carries bipartisan credibility.
5. **Be transparent early.** The instinct to minimize or delay disclosure erodes trust faster than the break itself. Acknowledge what happened, what you're doing about it, and when voters can expect an update. If some security detail cannot be shared publicly, say so plainly rather than declining to comment altogether.

Speed matters, but accuracy matters more. An office that has been publishing after-action reports all along starts this conversation from a position of credibility rather than defensiveness.

Two cautions:

- **The process itself is protective.** An office that followed its documented procedures and can show that it did is in a fundamentally different position than one that cannot.
- **Coordinate before speaking publicly.** Disclosure decisions in the current environment carry real consequences. Offices should coordinate with legal counsel and their state association before making a public statement about an incident. Detailed guidance on communicating during a chain of custody incident, including message framing and templates, is provided in the companion communications guidance.

4 | GUIDANCE FOR BROKEN CHAIN OF CUSTODY SCENARIOS

The general guidance provided above is applicable across all situations. Below is a high-level communication response structure tailored for specific potential scenarios.

Broken or Missing Seal

- **Who responds:** Election director + precinct leaders from both parties as backup
- **First action:** Verify and log immediately; do not wait for media inquiry
- **Key message:** "Caught by routine seal check, materials verified and accounted for, resealed and documented"
- **Timing:** Public written statement within a few hours if seal check occurs during active voting; otherwise noted in routine post-day reporting
- **Channels:** Internal record; public statement only if requested or scrutinized

Documentation / Logging Gap

- **Who responds:** Election director + bipartisan review team
- **First action:** Reconcile physical count against records before saying anything publicly
- **Key message:** "Missing paperwork, not a missing item; materials confirmed, documentation completed"
- **Timing:** Same-day resolution preferred; communicate only if raised publicly or discovered during audit
- **Channels:** Internal record; public written statement only if requested or scrutinized

Equipment Anomaly

- **Who responds:** Election director
- **First action:** Pull unit from service, verify all other units independently
- **Key message:** "One unit isolated and tested, all others verified, process caught it before affecting results"
- **Timing:** Same-day statement if voting was disrupted and/or if picked up publicly
- **Channels:** Internal record; public written statement; media conference if attention is high

Ballot or Count Discrepancy

- **Who responds:** Election director, with legal counsel and bipartisan or nonpartisan canvassing/reconciliation team
- **First action:** Full reconciliation before any public statement. Do not speculate on cause
- **Key message:** "Discrepancy identified during reconciliation, under review by bipartisan/nonpartisan team, count will be confirmed before certification"
- **Timing:** Holding statement within 24 hours; full explanation once reconciliation is complete
- **Channels:** Public written statement during reconciliation and after completing reconciliation; media conference after reconciliation if attention is high (include your bipartisan spokespeople)

Mail / Drop Box Ballot Tracking Issue

- **Who responds:** Election director and/or mail voting supervisor
- **First action:** Identify affected batch, confirm physical location, and secure ballots
- **Key message:** "Tracking delay identified for a specific batch, ballots located and being processed, voters can check status"
- **Timing:** Prompt update once batch is located, ideally within 24 hours
- **Channels:** Direct voter notifications (tracking system alerts), website/social alerts, public written statement; media conference if attention is high

Allegation of Insider Wrongdoing

- **Who responds:** Election director, with legal counsel and bipartisan review team (never a single official)
- **First action:** Do not confirm or deny details publicly until review begins; escalate internally first
- **Key message:** "Concern taken seriously, bipartisan review underway, process is designed to prevent one person acting alone"
- **Timing:** Holding statement within hours if public; substantive update when review has findings
- **Channels:** Formal written statement through designated spokesperson only; legal counsel review before release

Interference or Seizure Attempt by Outside Entity

- **Who responds:** Legal counsel, with election director (no front-line improvised responses)
- **First action:** Verify legal authority before any access or materials are released; document the encounter
- **Key message:** "Request received, legal process followed and verified before any action taken, documentation maintained throughout"
- **Timing:** Statement only after legal counsel has reviewed; avoid reactive same-hour statements
- **Channels:** Formal written statement through designated spokesperson and legal counsel; coordinate with state election office before speaking publicly

5 | SAMPLE STRUCTURE FOR PUBLIC STATEMENTS

An effective public statement about a chain of custody breach should include the following information, adapted to the situation and reviewed by your legal team:

- **What happened:** State plainly what was found, without minimizing or over-explaining.
- **What caught it:** Point to the specific safeguard that identified the issue, like a seal check, a two-person team, a reconciliation report, or a security camera.
- **What you're doing about it:** Explain the concrete steps you're taking, planning to take, or have already taken.
- **What happens next:** Offer a clear next action, like when an update will be provided or where any documentation will be available to the public.

6 | EXPLAINING CHAIN OF CUSTODY: VOTER-READY MESSAGES

Chain of custody is a technical process, but it shouldn't sound like one when you're explaining your systems to everyday voters. The language below translates the concept into plain language voters can immediately understand, without relying on jargon or acronyms. Use these building blocks in public materials, social media, voter guides, or everyday conversations, adapting them to fit your jurisdiction's specific processes and voice.

Sample definitions

- **One liner:** "Chain of custody" means every election asset is signed for, sealed, secured, and tracked, with a paper trail every step of the way.
- **Expanded:** "Chain of custody" means the processes election workers use to track every ballot and every piece of voting equipment at each step it moves through, from printing, to voting, to counting, to storage. Your local election workers work in bipartisan teams to check, seal, and sign off on everything along the way so there's always a clear, secured record of who had it and when. It's one of many checks and balances built into the whole process to make sure your vote is safeguarded and every election is accurate and secure.

- **Analogy: It's like a relay race.** Every time the baton (the ballot or equipment) is handed from one runner to the next, everyone knows exactly who has it and when. No handoff happens without both people confirming the exchange.

Topline messages

Checks and balances: This is one of many layers that keep elections safe.

"Chain of custody is one of many checks and balances we use to protect your vote. It works alongside other safeguards, like testing our equipment ahead of time and conducting audits after the election, to give everyone confidence that the count is accurate."

Routine: It's a routine part of how every election is run.

"These processes are a standard part of how elections have always been run. Tracking and checking our materials at every step is simply routine procedure."

Transparent: It's about being open, not secretive.

"None of this happens behind closed doors. We keep detailed, written records specifically so the process is transparent. If anyone ever has a question about how a ballot or a piece of equipment was handled, there's a clear, verifiable record to show them."

Protected: Everything is sealed, checked, and double-checked.

"Our ballots and equipment are kept in secured, sealed containers, meaning that if anyone tried to open them, it would be caught right away. Our team checks the seals every time materials are handed off, so we always know the materials are secured and where they should be."

Guarded: Nothing moves without two sets of eyes.

"Whenever ballots or voting equipment need to move or be handled, we never let just one person do it alone. We always have at least two people working together, and whenever possible, they come from different political parties. That way, no single person is ever making decisions on their own and everyone is checking each other's work."

Documented: Every handoff is written down and signed.

"Every time materials move from one place to another, or from one person to another, we write it down: who had it, when, and where it went next. Officials sign their names to confirm they checked and verified everything themselves. This creates a clear, documented trail that anyone can follow."

Trusted: Your community's own election workers are doing this work.

"These checks aren't performed by some outside company or far-off agency; they're carried out by your neighbors: local election workers who live in this community and take pride in their work, many of whom have worked here for years."

Bipartisan: The process is built to be bipartisan [nonpartisan], so we know it's fair.

"We intentionally pair people from different political parties [or include nonpartisan officials] to do this work together. It keeps everyone honest and keeps the process fair."

Quality control: These checks catch small issues before they become big problems.

"Part of why we do this is so that if something ever looks off, even something small, we can catch it and fix it right away."

Accountability: Our process is designed to stand up to any check.

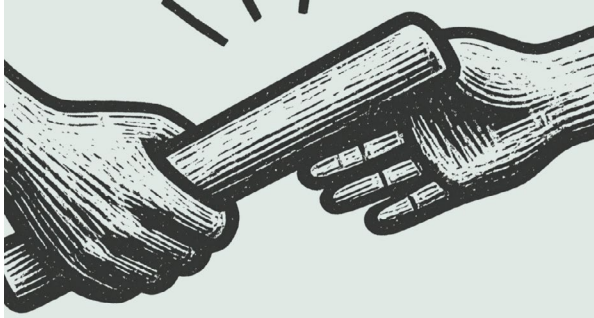
"People are paying closer attention to how elections are run than ever before, and that's a good thing. Because we track and document every step so thoroughly, our process can hold up to close review, whether that's a recount, a legal question, or someone simply asking: *'How do we know this was done right?'*"

Quick-reference: Words to use

Instead of technical terms...	Use plain, positive words like...
Chain of custody	Tracking, checking, following the process
Tamper-evident seals	Secured, sealed, protected
Two-person integrity protocol	Working in pairs, checking each other's work
Audit / reconciliation	Double-checking, confirming the count matches
Bipartisan teams	Officials from both parties working together
Documentation / logging	Writing it down, keeping a clear record

SOCIAL MEDIA GRAPHICS

Download the graphics for your office's use at
verifiedvoting.org/chainofcustodyblueprint.



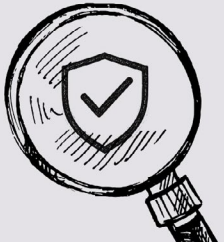
"Chain of custody" means we know who's handling ballots and equipment, and when. Think of it like a relay race: every handoff, from one worker to the next, gets logged. Nothing moves without someone signing for it.

Ballots and machines are sealed, signed for, and tracked—before, during, and after each election.

This chain of custody is crucial, but like seatbelts, airbags, and brakes work together to keep you safe when you're in a car, it's just one of many layers protecting your vote.



Your ballot never leaves our office's oversight. It's not handled by outsiders. Our office works around the clock to check, track, and make sure every eligible vote counts.



[Office name] identified [issue] during a routine check.

This is exactly why routine checks exist: our processes are built to catch issues and fix them.

We are [action or next step]. Follow us [@office] for official updates.

CONTACT US

This report highlights how a single commitment, that every ballot and every piece of equipment can be accounted for at every stage, plays out in law, in daily practice, and in public communication. Chain of custody is strongest where all three reinforce one another: clear legal authority, disciplined execution, and a public that understands the process.

We welcome tailored training for election offices that want direct support putting these practices into place. Reach out to founders@advanceelections.com.

To submit questions or comments about this report, please contact Advance Elections (founders@advanceelections.com), Verified Voting (info@verifiedvoting.org), or the Election Law Program (elect@wm.edu).

