

How Mail-In Voting Impacts People Experiencing Homelessness

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August 06, 2020

By [Tonya Mosley](#)  and [Allison Hagan](#) 



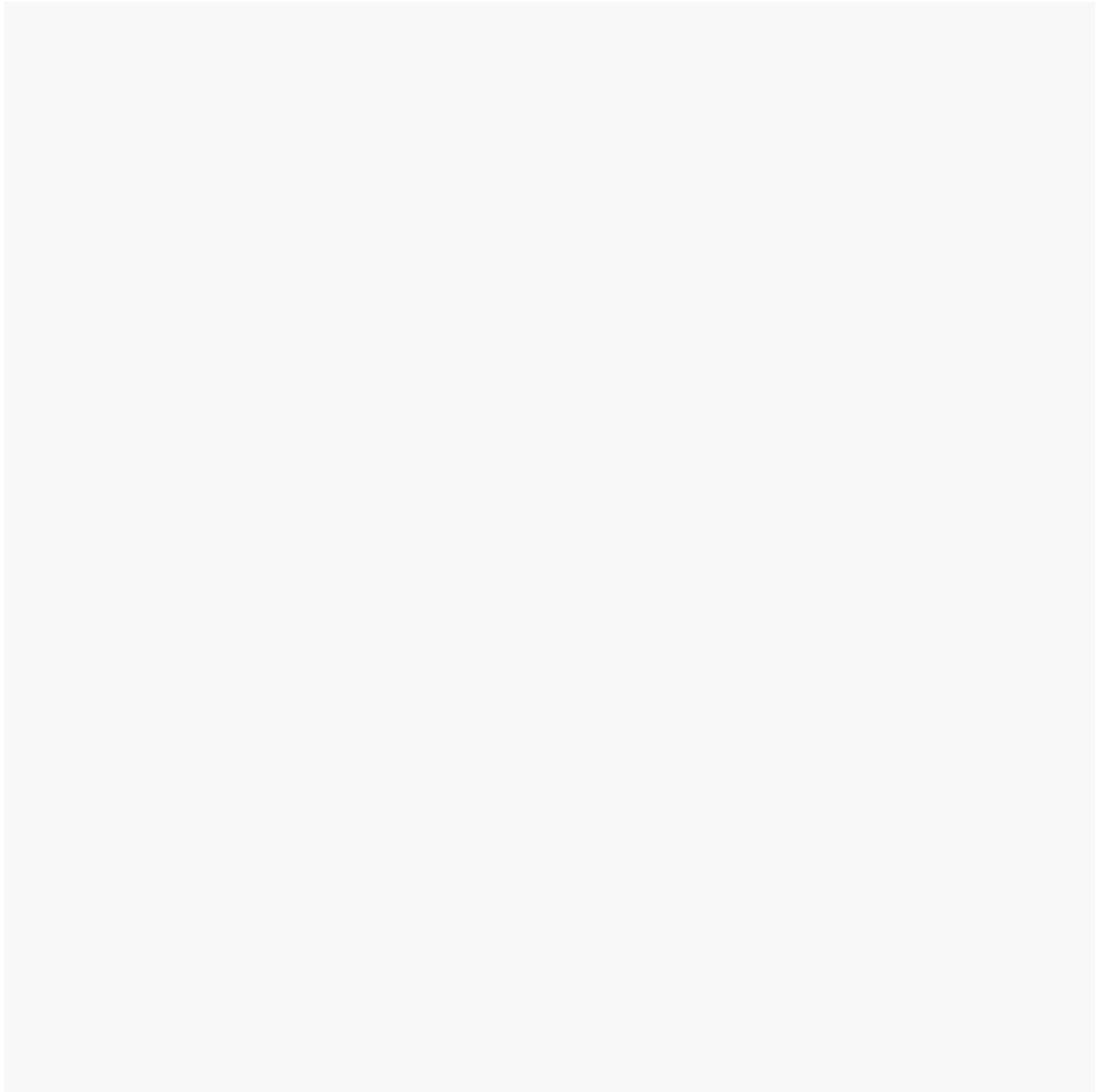
A street lined with tents in Bakersfield, California. (Alex Ashlock/Here & Now)

All 50 states are obligated by law to give people experiencing homelessness voting accommodations.

In past elections, people could use a shelter address, a street corner or a park to register to vote. But this year, the process is complicated as more states turn to vote by mail as a way to lessen exposure to COVID-19.

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Hillary Coleman, community projects manager at the nonpartisan, nonprofit [Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness](#), has spent the past six years working on homeless voter registration efforts in the Seattle area. Founded in 2008, the organization aims to ensure people in unsheltered populations know their voices matter.

“A couple of the challenges that we face when doing some of this work are just knowing that people have too often been made to feel like their voices don't matter,” she says. “And so voting might not be top of mind.”

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Volunteers help folks register to vote at day centers, hygiene centers and other places where people go for meals or other services. In Washington state, registering to vote is a “pretty low barrier process,” she says.

Many people think the process will take too long, but the volunteers inform them that it only takes a few minutes to register in Washington. Some people think they need a current state ID to register, but voters can use their social security number to verify their identity in the state.

Washington is known for its mail-in voter system, which Coleman says works well. Receiving a ballot earlier gives people more time to research where the candidates stand on key issues, she says.

The Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness provides the voter pamphlet from the county and additional nonpartisan information, she says.

“I think a challenge of voting when experiencing homelessness is not having the same level of access to materials about voting,” she says. “So with a little more time people, if they want to, you can do some of that more research.”

To register to vote in Washington, people without a residential address can put down an identifiable place such as a cross street, a park or a shelter near where they’re staying. Though people can’t receive mail at many of these places, most people pick theirs up at a mail center or a friend’s home, she says.

The organization also provides information about in-person voting centers in case people don’t receive their ballot. In-person voting centers are still important in case someone’s ballot goes to the wrong mailing address, she says.

States that have less experience with mail-in voting need to make sure in-person voting options are still accessible, she says, with respect to recommended COVID-19 precautions.

Voters could hit the polls in-person at two locations for local elections in King County this year, one in the parking lot of the election headquarters in Renton, Washington, and the other at CenturyLink Field, where Seattle teams play soccer and football. At CenturyLink Field, the county used plexiglass and provided people with masks.

The county also worked to ensure partner community organizations know how to prepare people for what to expect at the voting centers, she says.

“Especially with [mail-in voting] being a new process in many places, I think it’ll be really important for elections officials to figure out how they can partner with and make sure that organizations who provide services to people experiencing homelessness know how to help folks get out and vote,” she says.

With many people in the U.S. experiencing homelessness for the first time because of job losses and economic turmoil because of the coronavirus pandemic, Coleman says housing instability could impact voter turnout in November.

When someone loses their home or starts couch surfing, their existing registration might become outdated depending on the state’s voter laws, she says. But in Washington, this isn’t a problem thanks to same-day voter registration — which [only 21 states and Washington, D.C. have enacted](#).

“If you didn’t get your ballot, we can help you go do that and register on the same day in person,” she says. “I think that is pairing with a lot of the struggles that people are going to be facing, so same-day voter registration is really important.”


[Cristina Kim](#) produced this story and edited it for broadcast with [Tinku Ray](#). [Allison Hagan](#) adapted it for the web.

This segment aired on August 6, 2020.


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