



# Q&A

Amber McReynolds

**A**mber McReynolds is the CEO at the National Vote at Home Institute and Coalition, the co-author of *When Women Vote* and the former director of elections for the city and county of Denver, CO. *The Postal Record* interviewed her about the increasing popularity of voting by mail and what letter carriers are doing and can continue to do to promote vote-by-mail in their communities.

## ***The Postal Record:* How did you get involved in Vote at Home?**

**Amber McReynolds:** I was an elections official for about 14 years, and I served as the director of elections for Denver from 2011 to 2018. And over that period of time, I transitioned various systems. I was there during the time in which Denver was seeing a huge increase in the use of voting by mail. And then I helped to design and architect the legislation in 2013 that would enact provisions for every voter in the state to be mailed a ballot automatically before every election. And then I also instituted vote centers, same-day registration, mail ballot drop boxes and other reforms. All that work made Colorado one of the top states for not only engagement and turnout, but also security. We saw a huge increase in the confidence our voters had in the election process. And then I ran elections there for four or five years after that happened and became kind of a national speaker and helped other states, including California, pass their laws to expand voting at home. And then I decided in the fall of 2018 to leave my role in Denver and

become the CEO of the National Vote at Home Institute.

## ***The Postal Record:* When you were running the elections out there, what did you see and what did your voters see as the benefits to voting by mail?**

**Amber McReynolds:** First and foremost, when you look at data and studies that interviewed voters who did not vote in an election—and Pew Research Center has done this a few times, in 2016 and 2018—they often list convenience as one of the issues. So, people may be working more than 12 hours on a given day. They may be working multiple jobs. And then single parents are working and going to school. So, there's all kinds of reasons that would make it difficult for someone to go on one day, assigned to a government location that could be an hour from where they work or more. So, there's a lot of issues that affect people in all aspects of their lives that could make it difficult for that one day.

The other piece is, when we mail a ballot to a voter at home, they actually

are more informed because they can research issues and candidates. They can vote further down the ballot because they are not rushed in the voting booth after waiting in long lines.

And then, obviously, with this pandemic, it's exposed the significant vulnerabilities that exist with in-person voting. And right now, systems that are resilient are states like Washington, California, Oregon and other states that have adopted the vote-at-home procedures for their primaries, including Hawaii, Alaska, Wyoming and Kansas. So, we can see that demonstrated right now during this critical time.

***The Postal Record: Do you mind talking about the different levels of vote-by-mail? In some states there are no-excuse absentee ballots while in other states ballots are mailed to every registered voter. Why are there such different options in different states? Why isn't there one federal standard?***

**Amber McReynolds:** Under the Constitution, the elections clause gives Congress authority over federal elections, but states also have the authority as to the conduct of elections and how elections are run. So, different states have approached this in different ways.

Every state in the country has some form of absentee voting. So, it's not a new concept to everyone. Across the board, there is absentee voting in various states, including for military and overseas voters. And then western states have adopted more provisions, as of as of late, to expand options for their voters. This procedure element varies by state.

I also think that one of the biggest barriers to expanding this option is sim-

ply change. People often get elected in a certain model and then they are resistant to change that model, especially as a policy maker, because they are used to a system that elected them.

***The Postal Record: Do you see more buy-in from states when they roll it out in cities and counties, such as in Utah?***

**Amber McReynolds:** Yes, Utah empowered their counties to decide what works best for them. There was a similar model in Washington. We've also seen a similar type of enactment in Nebraska and North Dakota and California, who similarly empowered local jurisdictions to decide what adoption would look like. You contrast that with Colorado, which was more of a statewide enactment. It is going to vary depending on what a state's needs may be.

***The Postal Record: Do you see it as a movement where eventually most states will go to vote-by-mail or do you think there will always be different systems for different states?***

**Amber McReynolds:** In some states, I think voters are themselves opting in to expand vote-at-home. They're the ones asking for it. And so, I think that states are going to have to respond and look at that data very closely to decide what works for them in the future. And then also, when we're in an emergency situation, there might be procedures that get adopted on an emergency basis that then states will have to decide if they maintain long term or what they decide to do on them.

***The Postal Record: Why are there states where there are no vote-by-***

***mail options, such as Massachusetts and Arkansas? Is there any movement in those states?***

**Amber McReynolds:** Well, what I would say is I think the East Coast states have tended to rely more on in-person voting on Election Day. They've also had very little early voting in some states. And so they've had this "It's always been this way," sort of thing in place. I think a part of it is also that they haven't necessarily been encouraged to do anything different than what they've been doing because the options haven't been there for them to do that. I think when you do give people the option, like Virginia just passed a no-excuse bill and so did Pennsylvania, many people will take advantage of it and the numbers will grow over time. And that's certainly what we saw in the western states. And again, it benefits all voters. That's not partisan. It benefits every voter who wants to engage in the process.

***The Postal Record: Utah is an interesting example of that, where in some locations they tried vote-by-mail and then took it away, and voters were upset and demanded to have it back.***

**Amber McReynolds:** Yeah, that's right. Utah is a great example of where it's worked better for their voters and they've realized a ton of benefits. They've seen an increase in confidence in their election process. And so, I think, again, it's a nonpartisan issue. It's good for voters. It's not good for one side or the other, necessarily. It's just good for voters. And we have to keep our focus on that.

***The Postal Record: What are the things you at Vote at Home do***



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## to move voting by mail forward? What are the obstacles to getting vote by mail adopted more broadly?

**Amber McReynolds:** I always say that I think [resistance to] change is one of the biggest obstacles. I always encourage not only legislators, but also election officials in states where maybe it's not a widely used method of voting, to visit states that do have a widely used method or watch their videos and watch what their operations look like online. When you go and look at the states with the highest engagement and turnout, it also translates to higher trust in government. In all of the states that held this method of voting in some form or in an expanded form, they are at the top of the list. The states that limit access to voters, whether it be by mail or registration or early voting, are at the very bottom of the list every single time for turnout engagement. And that isn't good for democracy and it's, frankly, not good for either partisan side, because that just means that your voters are not engaged with your process and they likely have a lot less trust and confidence in the process.

And voters also should not have to wait for hours and hours in line in the rain like what we saw [in the Wisconsin primary] just to simply be able to exercise their right to vote right now, that makes a difference.

## **The Postal Record: Are there any valid reasons for opposing vote-by-mail, or at least any concerns that need to be addressed or problems to be rectified in the vote-by-mail process? If so, is your organization working on them?**

**Amber McReynolds:** Yes. There are valid concerns with any method of voting. And part of the reason for that is that there's humans involved in running the process. There [are] barriers sometimes in the policies themselves. And so, in all aspects of the election process, we need to be sure that the system is equitable, that it's accessible, it's fair and it's secure.

In vote-by-mail, in particular, there's various tools and procedures and processes that are important in making sure that all of those values are part of the voting model itself. And a good example is pre-paid postage. If voters have pre-paid postage on their envelope, they don't have to rely on somebody else to drop off the ballot, which we saw in North Carolina where election fraud was actually perpetrated to the voter. A bad actor was offering to pick up their ballots for them, partly because there wasn't pre-paid postage and also partly because one of the things North Carolina required was there to be two witnesses on file. They essentially took the power away from the individual voter and made the voters reliant on other people. And anytime you do that, that can create problems and incentives for bad actors.

The other piece is a tool called Ballot Tracking. We created this in Denver to empower voters with transparency and also [with] information about the status of their ballot. So exactly like [FedEx's or USPS's] tracking mechanism for a package, you can do for a mail ballot in Denver. And now that's spread around to various states and counties. With a tool like that, a voter knows where their ballot is and the election officials also can have the accountability and transparency to make sure ballots are going out as they should across the jurisdic-

tion. That adds an element of security.

The next piece is for us to mail you a ballot, we need to know where you are getting your address updates and being proactive about that, constantly verifying with voters as to whether they've moved. All of that in mail ballot states actually improve the quality of the lists. Because we interact more often with voters and because we do things like update addresses to the national change of address database, our address libraries are actually more accurate than, say, a state like Texas. All of that is important in ensuring security because we need to know where voters are. And if a voter has moved after we've done all that address updating, the ballot will come back undeliverable because it's not forwardable.

Another piece is signature verification. What's critical about this process is that you have a good signature verification procedure in place where bipartisan teams review the signatures and do a check to make sure that the voter who says that they voted on the ballot is actually the voter who turned it in. And that is, in essence, a check and a validator before the ballot gets counted.

Those are a couple of the steps that we utilize. And then the final piece that has worked really well for mail-ballot states in particular is a risk-limiting audit after the election. And you can do that in a mail-ballot vote or not, but it's still an important chance to make sure there hasn't been any interference along the way.

## **The Postal Record: In the research your organization works on or in your time in Colorado, have there been any results that surprised you?**

**Amber McReynolds:** I would say the voter satisfaction. I sort of expected it, but I didn't expect it in the same vol-

ume that we received. What I mean by that is when we shifted this model, our call volume went down by close to 70 percent in a presidential year. And the reason for that is voters are no longer confused. They're not trying to call to figure out what polling place to go to. We proactively got them their ballot and proactively got them information about their ballot with our ballot tracking system. So that huge reduction in calls, even though we actually served more voters in 2016, is significant.

The second part of that is once we went to this model, we also started to receive, and not in small quantities, thank-you notes from voters inside their mail-ballot envelopes. They would send in their ballot for an election and they would literally write a thank-you note to the elections office, to the judges, to everyone. And they would say things like, "I voted in multiple states and this has never been more convenient. Thank you so much." Or, "Last time I voted in X state, I had to wait for hours in line. And this is amazing how this has happened."

I think that is not only indicative of voters' appreciation, but also demonstrates their confidence in the process. The accolades that the Denver office and that Colorado received is significant. Colorado's been named as one of the safest states to vote in, one of the most convenient. Our turnout went up. We haven't had voters challenging the process because they're confident in the process. We haven't had the same controversies in elections that other states have had because there's confidence not only amongst one party or the other, it's amongst all parties, all demographics, all partisan leanings. There's confidence in this process. And I think that is one of the most important accomplishments of what we did.

### ***The Postal Record: Do you find more interest in vote-by-mail among younger or older voters?***

**Amber McReynolds:** Everyone seems to like it. For sure we saw an increase amongst young voters. We did see that it helped them. But I think you also have to think about the other aspects of the Colorado model that also help with that. For instance, the same-day registration vote centers. There's other aspects of it that have improved customer service.

I think that voters overall, in all facets, have benefited from it across the board. We saw an uptick, not only for Democrats, but for Republicans and for unaffiliated voters all alike. And I think that's really important.

### ***The Postal Record: How has NALC helped advance this movement to vote by mail?***

**Amber McReynolds:** The National Association of Letter Carriers is an amazing partner and a champion for us. One of the founding board members is your executive vice president, Brian Renfroe. And [NALC Chief of Staff] Jim Sauber has been a critical advisor for all things for us.

This type of model heavily relies on the post office. So, the letter carriers and the fact that they're delivering democracy in this way is critical to this reform and this method of voting. And voters rely heavily on the post office, as well as the letter carriers, to make sure that their democracy is delivered to them.

So, we're eternally grateful to the letter carriers for their support throughout the process. And certainly, they are a network of enthusiastic supporters.

### ***The Postal Record: What are some things letter carriers and mail advocates can do to help promote voting by mail in their states?***

**Amber McReynolds:** Contact your legislators, governor, secretary of state to express your support or your desire to be able to vote this way. Your support for this method is really important and that advocacy matters because your group is [made up of] local constituents. And let your election officials know that you want this method of voting not only yourself, but for your family and your friends.

And then, engaging with election officials. I always encourage anyone who hasn't toured an election office to go tour it and see how the back end of the process works.

Also, serve as an election judge. A lot of companies and a lot of government institutions will let voters take the day off to go work as a poll worker. And there's a lot of opportunities to support election offices. I think that's a good way for letter carriers to engage in the process of the election infrastructure itself.

### ***The Postal Record: Is there anything else you'd like to say to letter carriers?***

**Amber McReynolds:** The way I would end is to say that in a pandemic and in this unprecedented crisis, we need extraordinary creativity to make sure all Americans can vote in a safe and secure way. And one of the ways that we can do that is we can deliver democracy by mailing every voter a ballot and also providing them in-person voting options, as well as modern voter-registration methods so that they can engage in a confident way, in a secure way and in a safe way in our democracy. **PR**