

Community Solutions Voter Toolkit

Your Guide to Voting to End Homelessness in the 2020 U.S. Elections

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Your Vote Can End Homelessness

Elections matter. From the country's highest federal offices to the city or town council members who represent your neighborhood, a ballot is every American's opportunity to have a say in who governs—and how. Because, with each election, the leaders who emerge and the institutions they lead impact our individual lives, every single day.

When it comes to ending homelessness, elections matter—and your vote counts toward ensuring we have leaders who care about the issues you do. The President of the United States chooses the heads of agencies like the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which addresses Americans' housing needs; the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, which coordinates national efforts among federal agencies to prevent and end homelessness; and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, our partners who help address veteran homelessness.

Federal lawmakers in the House of Representatives and the Senate determine national policy for things like health care, criminal justice, and funding for programs including rental assistance, emergency housing, and unemployment.

At the state level, your Governor and state legislature decide how counties, cities, and towns can raise and receive funding and care for their residents. And at the most local levels, mayors, county boards, city and town councils, and other local government officials have a big say in how local money gets spent, the ordinances that regulate where people live, the resources that let them access city services, and more.

While it may feel like your vote is just one of faceless millions, remember that, when you vote in a local election, you're one of just thousands, or even hundreds of people doing so. In the last twenty years, a dozen different U.S. races have been decided by just one vote, and even more have come down to astoundingly slim margins, with impacts ranging from a tiebreaking coin flip in 2017 to determine control of the Virginia House of Delegates to deciding on county commissioners, state house seats, and even Minnesota's U.S. Senator in 2008. In 2000, just 537 votes in Florida determined our 43rd President, George W. Bush!

Your vote really does matter.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we're now dealing with not only a public health crisis but also a major economic recession, record unemployment, strains on our health care and law enforcement systems, and a mounting eviction problem. State and local leaders have

come together to address the housing emergencies generated by these compounding challenges, so we know change is possible.

It's time to make the right solutions permanent.

So these decisions—and your vote—matter now more than ever. Casting a ballot in the 2020 elections means that you help choose leaders who care about every American's wellbeing. Your vote makes a difference, especially at the local level, when you choose candidates and support issues that move our country toward long-term solutions to homelessness, eliminating its impact on millions of Americans.

How to use this toolkit

Communities across the country are proving that we can end homelessness. This is not a radical belief: we work with more than 80 cities and counties making it a reality every day. Through our [Built for Zero](#) initiative, over 80 communities demonstrate every day how progress can be accelerated—or stymied—depending on lawmakers' commitment to making homelessness rare and brief.

Elections provide us the opportunity to demonstrate to future lawmakers—and to other voters—that homelessness is an election issue, one that people care about and will vote on. Elections also give us the chance to educate candidates and voters about long-term solutions that can break down barriers to ending homelessness and ensure that everyone in their community has a place to call home.

We created this toolkit to give our community partners, donors, and others committed to ending homelessness the tools to leverage this historic election season. These tools focus on the key information you need to know to register to vote, prepare to vote, and educate candidates about solutions to end homelessness in your community.

Are Your Candidates Committed to Ending Homelessness?

While much of the focus of the 2020 election will be on the presidential election at the top of the ticket, state and local lawmakers like mayors, city council members, county commissioners, state legislators, and governors play a leading role in how local governments address homelessness. Their actions are critical to prevent housing instability, ensure people experiencing homelessness receive services, and provide the proper funding and support to our local systems that respond to homelessness.

Ensuring Data is Embedded into Solutions to End Homelessness

Ending homelessness in America will take major changes at every level of government. And while there are many policies that can address housing and homelessness—such as Housing First, rental assistance and eviction prevention programs, decriminalization of homelessness, and land use and zoning rules, to name a few—**we know that addressing homelessness requires a data-driven approach.**

As you review who your candidates are and decide whom to support, consider how each stands on policies that aim to *measurably* end homelessness, like collecting real-time data, making this data publicly available, and setting measurable goals for reducing or ending homelessness.

Questions for Local, State, and Federal Candidates

If you haven't already, you might soon start getting phone calls, texts, and maybe even a masked door-knocker asking you to support their candidate. While you might want to decline these calls or not answer your door, these are excellent opportunities to educate your candidates through their volunteers about homelessness and ways to solve it!

Here are some examples of questions you can ask your candidates, if you get the chance.

- How knowledgeable are you about homelessness in our community or state?
- Do you support setting measurable goals for reducing and ending homelessness in our city or state? Why or why not?
- Like the uninsured rate or jobless rate, would you commit to tracking and publicly sharing the number of people in our community or state experiencing homelessness, month over month? Would you commit to sharing the steps you are taking to solve it?
- Access to affordable housing is a piece of the puzzle to end homelessness. How would you expand access to affordable housing in our community or state?

A basic internet search also can help you find clues about your candidates' stance on key issues. Like topics such as health care, education, and the environment, candidates should develop and state clear policy solutions to housing and homelessness.

- Does the candidate have a policy platform dedicated to housing and homelessness?
- Do they have a data-driven approach to policy challenges? For example, do they have a track record of utilizing information to make decisions that affect a number of people?
- Does their economic plan address housing shortages and barriers?
- Do they have a collaborative approach to policy challenges?

How to Register and Vote

Key Deadlines

Your state’s Secretary of State and Board of Elections websites should have all the information you need to register and vote—but those sites aren’t always the easiest to navigate. Feel free to call to ask for information, or visit the trustworthy resources listed below for more details.

The important dates you need to know are:

- **Registration Deadline:** Different states have different rules when it comes to registering to vote online, by mail, and in-person—these may have different deadlines, or may all be the same deadline. Some states also offer same-day in-person voter registration at your polling place.
- **Mail-In Ballot Request Deadline:** Some states mail ballots to their voters automatically, but most require that you request an absentee ballot (which is the same thing as a mail-in ballot). If your state requires a request form, you may be able to complete it online, or you may have to return a physical copy to your county election office.
- **Absentee Ballot Return Deadline:** Your mail-in ballot/absentee ballot must be received by the election office by Election Day—but different states define this deadline in different ways. Some states require a postmark by a certain date; others just need the ballot in-hand by a certain time. Check what your state’s requirements are, and see if you can return your ballot in person or via a secure drop box, as an alternative to risking postal system delays.
- **Early Voting Dates:** If you want to vote in person, check if your state offers early in-person voting—most do, but the polling locations may differ from where you vote on Election Day. Either way, find out what dates (and times!) early voting is available so you can cast your ballot when it’s convenient.

However you plan to register and vote, do it as soon as you can! You want to make sure that your registration, ballot request, and your actual ballot are all processed on time so that you’re able to vote and have your vote counted without any issues.

Where to Find Out Your State’s Voter Deadlines

- Call 1-866-OUR-VOTE
- nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state
- usa.gov/election-office
- vote.org/absentee-ballot-deadlines
- vote.org/voter-registration-deadlines

Voter Registration Tools

Every state except North Dakota requires Americans over the age of 18 to register if they want to become a voter. Luckily, it's easy to register to vote—and it can take as little as two minutes, depending on your state's rules.

In 39 states and Washington, D.C., you can register to vote online; other states require a physical form, which is available to complete and return at most state or local election offices, departments of motor vehicles (DMV), armed forces recruitment centers, or public assistance offices. You can also download and print a state or national voter registration form and mail that to your local election office.

Once your registration has been processed, you should receive a card in the mail at the address where you registered, showing that you're a registered voter and noting your Election Day polling place (which may be different than where you can vote early, if that is an option). For more on your state's registration rules and what to expect, visit [vote.org/voter-registration-rules](https://www.vote.org/voter-registration-rules).

If you have a felony conviction, you may still be eligible to vote! Enfranchisement laws vary by state, but most now allow anyone to vote once they've completed their sentence or parole, and some states also allow people with felony convictions to petition for their right to vote to be restored. To learn more about what your state permits and how you can vote in this and future elections, visit [nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state/special-circumstances/voting-as-an-ex-offender](https://www.nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state/special-circumstances/voting-as-an-ex-offender).

Voting Options

Every state offers at least two different ways you can vote: day-of in-person or absentee (which is the same thing as mail-in) voting. Simply put, in-person voting is when you go to your polling place and cast a ballot there; absentee or mail-in voting is when you receive a ballot by mail, complete it, and return it to your local election office.

Voting in Person

For in-person voting, most states now also offer early in-person voting as an option. This is a period of time prior to Election Day when voters can visit designated polling places (which may be different from your assigned Election Day polling place) to vote early. Early voting means your ballot is counted with Election Day votes and includes all the same candidates and issues, but you can cast it at any point in the early voting period. Because that period often includes evenings and weekends and usually lasts at least a week, in-person early voting is a great option for voters who may not be able to vote on Election Day, or who just

want to make sure they've voted as soon as possible. For information about your state's early voting options, visit vote.org/early-voting-calendar.

Voting By Mail (also called Absentee Voting)

Mail-in voting rules are even more dependent on where you live. To learn more and find out how to request an absentee ballot in your state, visit vote.org/absentee-ballot.

Five states now hold elections 100 percent by mail, and another four states mail ballots directly to all voters by default, allowing those voters to decide whether to vote by mail or in person. So, if you live in California, Colorado, Hawaii, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, Washington State, or Washington, D.C., you don't have to do anything—your ballot will arrive at the address where you're registered to vote with instructions on how to complete it and return it securely.

If you don't live in one of these states, you'll have to request an absentee or mail-in ballot. Check whether your state uses an online form, a mailed form, or both. Some states will mail request forms to all registered voters this year, while others ask that voters proactively submit their forms. However your state handles requests, get yours in before the deadline so you can be sure to have your mail-in ballot sent to you on time. Most state's request forms no longer require you to say why you want to vote absentee, but some states still require a specific and approved reason. To find out your state's rules, visit vote.org/absentee-voting-rules.

Regardless of how you get your mail-in ballot, make sure to vote and return it quickly and securely. That helps your ballot be postmarked and received before your state's deadline. The mailed ballot should come with information about how to vote properly and how to send it back. Read and follow those instructions carefully to ensure your vote gets counted!

In addition to returning your ballot by mail, several states have also begun to offer secure drop boxes for ballot returns, and some localities will accept physical drop-offs at certain government buildings. Visit usa.gov/election-office to find out how to check with your local board of elections to find out if those options are available in your area.

What You Need to Vote

Some states require you show a photo ID or other documentation to vote in-person, or to provide similar information when voting absentee. These rules vary widely by state—and they can change from year to year!—so it's important to confirm what you need to vote where you live. To find out more, visit vote.org/voter-id-laws or usa.gov/voter-id.

Preparing to Vote

Who and What Will You Vote For?

When voting for issues you care about, it's important to know what names, parties, and issues are on your ballot this year in advance, so you can determine how candidates stand on issues you care about. Visit ballotpedia.org/sample_ballot_lookup or vote411.org to see who and what you'll be voting on in 2020!

Regardless of where you live, every ballot in the United States will include candidates for President and the U.S. House of Representatives, and 35 states have U.S. Senate races as well. Most states will also have elections for their own legislatures, and many counties, cities, and towns will have local elections this year, too. To learn more about the candidates on your ballot this year and to see what positions they've taken, visit ballotready.org or ballotpedia.org/elections#2020_election_coverage_by_office.

In addition to voting for candidates, your state or locality may have issues for you to vote on as well. These may be called referendums, questions, propositions, or measures, and they can determine different laws and regulations, changes in taxes and government spending, or even state constitutional amendments. The wording can sometimes be confusing when read for the first time, so we recommend checking out what issues are on your ballot and what a “yes” or “no” vote on each means. Local newspapers may have voter guides along these lines; you can also visit ballotpedia.org/2020_ballot_measures for more information.

Plan for Election Day

Whether you plan to vote by mail or in-person, early or day-of, it's important to decide how you are going to vote and to make a plan. For mail-in voting, be sure to meet all the registration, request, and submission deadlines to ensure your vote gets counted. You can sign up for reminders at rockthevote.org/how-to-vote/get-election-reminders.

In-person voting may take a little more thought. Decide whether you want to vote early or on Election Day, and confirm where your polling place is and when it's open. Remember, early voting locations and schedules may be different than Election Day—and your voter registration is likely linked with your Election Day polling place, not necessarily where you can vote early.

Once you've determined what day you'll vote and the location, make your plan:

- **What time of day are you going, and are you prepared to wait in line?**
Remember, once you're in line on Election Day you have the right to vote—but

when lines are long, that may take a while. Your employer cannot legally prevent you from voting, but early voting (which often has shorter lines and more flexible hours) may be a good option if your schedule is tight.

- **What type of transportation do you need?** If you cannot walk or take public transit to your polling place and need a ride, many public agencies, nonprofit organizations, political parties, and rideshare companies all offer free rides to polls on Election Day. However, with COVID restrictions, these options may be limited this year, so be sure to call ahead!
- **Do you need childcare?** Children can accompany their parents to the polls in every state, but some states have certain rules about how many are permitted. Check with your local election commission ahead of time if you have more than one or two children you need to bring, or make a plan for their care while you go vote.
- **What if the weather is bad and you need to wait in line?** Bring a coat, umbrella, comfortable shoes, and whatever else may help you stay safe and comfortable while you wait. Again, early voting may be a good option if you're worried—with flexible dates and shorter lines, you can plan ahead to vote when it makes sense for you.
- **Do you have the right documents with you?** Voter ID laws vary widely by state and can change frequently, so be sure to check what you need to bring in order to vote when you're ready.

Having a plan in place helps make sure that voting is part of your day—it gets you to the polls on time and ensures that your voice is heard!

COVID-19 Pandemic Considerations

Voting During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In some ways, the 2020 election isn't that different from previous elections. On the first Tuesday in November, Americans can head to their physical polling places and cast a ballot in person. Absentee ballot options are available in every state, and 43 out of 50 states allow mail-in voting for any and every voter. (Remember, absentee and mail-in voting are two names for the same thing—voting by mail!)

What's different this year is, of course, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Many polling places will have precautionary health measures in place, such as socially distant lines, plastic barriers for poll workers, limits on how many people can be in a building at once, and sanitizing regimens. If you plan to vote in person, whether early or on Election Day, wear a mask and prepare for a longer wait time than you may be used to—but remember, once you're in line, you have the right to cast your vote!

If you plan to and are eligible to vote by mail, request your ballot as soon as you can! Mail-in votes are expected to be at an all-time high this year, so the earlier you request yours, the more time the postal system has to deliver it to you. When you receive your ballot, return it as soon as possible, so that it's postmarked and received before your state's deadline.

Despite the pandemic, seven states still require a reason besides COVID-19 for voters to request an absentee ballot. If you live in Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, South Carolina, Tennessee, or Texas and don't qualify for an absentee ballot this year, prepare to vote in person as safely as possible.

However you vote this year, make sure you vote—and stay safe in the process!

Engaging and Educating your Community

Virtual Voter Registration Drives

Voter registration drives are a great way to ensure people in your organization, town, neighborhood, or campus are registered to vote and aware of the upcoming election. Because the COVID-19 pandemic prevents many people from setting up a table in a public place with physical forms to fill out, a virtual drive can be a great way to get the word out about the importance of voting and to ensure that people in your area and networks register on time. All it takes is some registration forms, a little publicity, and a willingness to ask folks to get registered!

To run a virtual voter registration drive, get started with these resources:

- dosomething.org/us/articles/watch-how-to-run-a-voter-registration-drive
- nonprofitvote.org/nonprofitvotescount/voter-registration-toolkit/
- rockthevote.org/get-involved/help-register-voters/

Virtual Town Hall Events

Town hall meetings traditionally gather people interested in discussing an issue or hearing from experts. In an election season, this setting can also be a great way for candidates to discuss their views on certain topics and for voters to ask questions. With social distancing measures and limited indoor capacities in place, however, in-person town hall meetings may be few and far between in 2020—but that doesn't mean the format is off-limits!

Virtual town hall events can connect voters with candidates in meaningful and substantive ways, or for voters to connect with each other to discuss the election ahead and the issues at hand. Luckily, there is no shortage of options for convening online events via video conference or social media. What Works Cities, an initiative of Bloomberg Philanthropies, created [a detailed framework for how to create a safe and effective virtual event](#).