

ABSENTEE VOTING 101

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INTRODUCTION

Brief Overview

This capstone project addresses a recurring challenge in Lake County: preventable errors on absentee ballot applications and ballots that result in provisional status or rejection. Drawing on CEATS principles and tools, the project reframes these errors as predictable system failures rather than individual voter mistakes. Using process mapping, statutory analysis, and election workflow knowledge, the project identifies where voters most often encounter difficulty—particularly seniors, Travel Board voters, and Voters with Print Disabilities—and develops clear, accessible educational materials to intervene at those points.

The project delivers voter-focused guides and outreach tools that translate complex election procedures into plain, actionable steps. By emphasizing signature consistency, deadlines, and the consequences of common errors, the materials aim to reduce absentee ballot rejections, preserve voter intent, and strengthen public confidence. Rooted in election integrity, accessibility, and ethical administration, this project extends CEATS principles beyond the office and into the hands of voters, transforming professional training into measurable, community-level impact.

Project Description

While working as an election clerk and overseeing absentee provisional ballots, several key challenges with the absentee voting process have become evident. Many voters are unfamiliar with the absentee voting options and the procedures involved. Requesting an application, completing it, and returning it by the deadline can often be confusing and time-consuming. If the process must be repeated, it often takes too long and risks missing the deadline entirely.

A significant and recurring barrier involves the signature verification process. Many seniors and individuals with disabilities, particularly those affected by strokes or other health conditions, frequently struggle to replicate their signatures consistently. Even when they complete an affidavit affirming their ballot signature, their votes are frequently rejected due to signature mismatches, which undermines voter confidence and participation.

A major issue with absentee ballot voting is the disconnect between the application process and the ballot requirements. The application allows a voter with disabilities to request assistance, permitting another individual to complete and sign the affidavit of assistance, print the voter's name, and sign their own name. However, the ballot itself does not provide the same accommodation and must be signed personally by the voter. In addition, the signature on the ballot must match the signature on the application for the vote to be considered valid. This structural inconsistency creates a barrier for voters who are physically unable to sign or maintain consistent handwriting, despite having been permitted assistance earlier in the process.

This raises a critical question: why does the absentee voting process provide an accommodation at the application stage but require a different accommodation at the ballot stage? Addressing this disconnect will be critical to reducing rejected ballots and improving confidence in absentee voting.

This issue is personal to me. I have played a direct role in this process, tracking provisional ballots rejected due to mismatched signatures and engaging in extended conversations with voters impacted by these problems, whose top concern is simply being allowed to vote and having their vote count. When we fail to meet their needs, it fosters both distrust and disenfranchisement.

Some signed ABS-18 affidavits are returned to the office but are ultimately rejected by the Board of Elections. Each affidavit explicitly states that the information provided is subject to the penalties of perjury. When a voter returns a signed affidavit and it is rejected, the practical effect is that the voter is told their sworn statement is not credible. While legally procedural, this outcome can feel deeply personal and discouraging to the voter, potentially eroding trust in the process and in the institution administering it.

Although we can broadcast messages to the public, voting remains an individual and deeply cherished right.

The Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the project is to reduce preventable absentee ballot errors in Lake County by equipping voters with clear, accessible guidance before mistakes occur. By addressing common issues such as missing signatures, invalid dates, and signature mismatches, the project seeks to preserve voter intent, minimize provisional ballots, and ensure that eligible votes are counted.

Grounded in CEATS principles of election integrity, accessibility, and ethical administration, this project transforms complex statutory processes into voter-friendly tools for seniors, Travel Board voters, and Voters with Print Disabilities. Its purpose is not only to inform, but to strengthen voter confidence, reduce administrative burden, and promote a more accurate, equitable, and trusted absentee voting process.

My connection to this project is both professional and personal. As an election clerk, I routinely witness how small, unintentional mistakes on absentee applications and ballots can prevent a valid vote from being counted. I see the frustration of voters who believed they did everything right, only to learn that their ballot became provisional or was rejected because of a missing or mismatched signature and now potentially a missing date. I also see the time and resources required for staff to resolve these issues within tight statutory deadlines.

Through CEATS, I gained a system-level understanding of how each step in the election process depends on the one before it. That perspective made it clear that many of these errors are predictable and preventable. This project grew directly from my daily work as an election professional to protect voter intent, uphold integrity, and reduce barriers wherever possible. It reflects my commitment to ensuring that voters-especially seniors, Travel Board voters, and Voters with Print Disabilities-are not disenfranchised by avoidable procedural pitfalls.

PROJECT GOALS

Objectives

These objectives were designed to support the overall purpose of preserving voter intent and strengthening the accuracy and integrity of absentee voting in Lake County. The project focused on developing a series of clear, voter-friendly educational tools in the form of quick-reference guides that explain the absentee voting process in an accessible and understandable manner. A primary objective was to identify and analyze the most common causes of absentee ballot errors, including missing signatures, invalid dates, and signature mismatches, and to address these issues through targeted instruction. Materials were specifically created for seniors, Travel Board voters, and voters with print disabilities using accessible language and visual aids to improve comprehension.

Additional objectives included distributing these materials through in-office use, outreach events, and partnerships with organizations serving elderly and disabled populations. The project also aimed to increase voter understanding of signature consistency, deadlines, and cure procedures, while reducing the number of provisional absentee ballots caused by preventable voter errors in future elections. Another important objective was to provide election staff with standardized educational resources that can be reused and adapted across election cycles to support long-term voter education efforts.

Desired Outcomes

The intended outcomes of these objectives include improving voter understanding of the absentee voting process, particularly how to correctly complete applications and ballots. As voters become more familiar with required procedures, seniors, Travel Board voters, and Voters with Print Disabilities are expected to experience fewer errors when voting absentee. This improvement is anticipated to result in a measurable decrease in provisional absentee ballots caused by missing signatures, invalid dates, and signature mismatches, as documented through standardized spreadsheet tracking and SVRS data.

Additional expected outcomes include an increase in absentee ballots being accepted on first review, reducing the need for cure through ABS-18 affidavits and preserving voter intent. Voters are also expected to report greater confidence in their ability to vote absentee correctly and on time. Election staff are anticipated to spend less time resolving preventable errors, allowing resources to be redirected toward service and accuracy rather than remediation.

Over time, the Lake County Board of Elections and Registration will benefit from maintaining a standardized, reusable set of voter education tools that can be implemented across future election cycles. These outcomes are expected to improve transparency in the absentee voting process and strengthen public trust in election administration through clear, accessible voter education. Each outcome reflects a measurable improvement in voter experience, administrative efficiency, and overall system performance. These outcomes directly support the project's goal of reducing preventable absentee ballot errors while preserving voter intent and strengthening confidence in the election process.

METHODS

Schedule

The development of this project followed a structured timeline designed to move from research to implementation. Initial efforts focused on collecting statutory requirements and eligibility information related to absentee voting to ensure that all educational materials reflected accurate Indiana election law. After completing the research phase, the project moved into a design and development phase where materials were drafted into accessible formats appropriate for a wide range of voters. These materials included visual guides, printed instructions, and interactive tools designed to simplify complex procedures. Following development, materials were reviewed by peers and members of the target audience to ensure clarity, usability, and accessibility. Final versions were printed and prepared for distribution. Public outreach began in January 2026 and continues through presentations, community events, and the distribution of printed materials and educational tools.

Research & Curation	Collect info and eligibility rules for each category	Sept-Oct 2025
Design & Content Development	Drafted materials into the educational formats	Nov-Dec 2025
Review & Accessibility Testing	Peer and target audience review	December 2025 January 2026
Print & Production	Print materials in all formats Develop outreach game	January 2026
Public Outreach Begins	Distribute materials and Launch QR/video content	January 2026 - Ongoing

Data Collection and Information Gathering

Information for this project was gathered through multiple methods to ensure accuracy and relevance to real-world voting conditions. A review of absentee ballot processing workflows in Lake County was conducted to understand each step in the absentee voting process. This included an analysis of common error types observed during daily operations, particularly missing signatures and signature mismatches. Statutory and procedural requirements were examined through the review of Indiana election Code, Indiana Secretary of State manuals, and guidance from the Election Assistance commission (EAC). Additional information was obtained from CEATS course materials covering election systems, accessibility, and election integrity. Informal expert consultation with instructors and election professionals provided further clarification of procedures and best practices. Direct observation of voter interactions and recurring voter questions also informed the development of this project. These methods ensured the project addressed real, recurring system failures rather than theoretical issues.

How Goals Were Achieved

Goals were achieved by translating complex statutory and procedural requirements into plain-language, voter-centered tools. Process mapping was used to identify where voters most often

encounter difficulties, particularly with signature requirements, deadlines, and affidavit completion.

Based on these findings, I created a series of targeted educational materials designed to address these problem areas. These materials included an absentee voting flyer, a step-by-step brochure, and a detailed instructional booklet highlighting the common pitfalls of absentee voting and how to avoid them. Each resource emphasized signature consistency, required deadlines, and the consequences of common errors.

To further strengthen voter engagement and understanding, I also developed an interactive educational board game titled *Climb the Ladder, Count the Vote*, which visually demonstrates how correct actions help ballots progress successfully while mistakes lead to delays or rejection. This tool provided an engaging method to reinforce learning and improve retention of key voting procedures.

Educational materials were designed to intervene at specific failure points with clear instructions, visual cues, and emphasis on deadlines and signature consistency. Through the development and use of these materials, the project successfully met its goals of improving voter understanding and reducing preventable absentee ballot errors.

How the Problem Was Solved

The problem—preventable absentee ballot errors—was addressed proactively rather than reactively. Instead of relying on post-election cure procedures, the project equips voters before errors occur. Educational materials were distributed through in-office availability and direct community outreach, allowing voters to receive instruction before completing their absentee applications and ballots.

Outreach efforts included presentations and educational sessions with community organizations such as Indivisible, AARP, the Urban League, the League of Women Voters, the Gary City Council on Friendly Aging, Calumet Township Trustee senior programs, and Divine Nine fraternity and sorority town hall events. These sessions provided opportunities to distribute printed materials, demonstrate correct absentee voting procedures, and answer voter questions in real time.

Community engagement during these events has been strong. Participants frequently request additional materials to share within churches, neighborhood groups, and community meetings. Follow-up invitations have been received through phone calls and emails requesting additional presentations demonstrating continued demand for voter education. Participation in statewide outreach, including an upcoming virtual session with Indiana AARP, further expands the reach of this project.

Presentations often extended beyond scheduled timeframes due to audience engagement. For example, a scheduled seven-minute presentation at a Friendly Aging Council event expanded to approximately thirty minutes due to participant interest and discussion. This level of engagement demonstrates the need for clear absentee voting guidance and the effectiveness of the materials created.

A key goal of this project is not only to educate individual voters, but also to equip community leaders and trusted organizations with accurate information they can share within their own networks. By teaching community leaders and organizers, this project creates a multiplier effect, which expands the reach of accurate absentee voting information and reduces preventable errors throughout the community.

Tools, Resources, and Materials Utilized

Multiple tools and resources were used to develop, test, and distribute the educational materials created for this project. Professional resources included CEATS instructional frameworks, Indiana Election Code, Indiana Secretary of State manuals, and Statewide Voter Registration System (SVRS) procedures, which provided the statutory and procedural foundation for accurate voter guidance. Election calendars and statutory timelines were used to ensure that all deadlines and requirements were correctly communicated.

Process-mapping techniques were used to analyze absentee voting workflows and identify common failure points where voters frequently make errors. These findings guided the development of targeted educational materials, including a flyer, brochure, instructional booklet, and an interactive board game designed to reinforce correct voting procedures.

Educational materials were designed using Microsoft Word and Canva to create clear layouts and visual guides. The outreach board game, *Climb the Ladder, Count the Vote*, was developed using Canva design tools, printed on a GIS printer, and mounted to foam board to support repeated use during outreach events.

Printed materials were produced using standard office printing equipment, allowing for cost-effective reproduction and wide distribution. Presentation tools were used to support in-person and virtual outreach events. These combined tools ensured that information was delivered in clear, accessible formats suitable for diverse audiences.

Evaluation and Assessment Procedures

Success will be measured by comparing absentee ballot outcomes before and after implementation. Baseline data from prior elections will be used as a comparison point to measure improvement over time. Using a standardized spreadsheet, the number and percentage of provisional absentee ballots caused by missing signatures, signature mismatches, and invalid dates will be tracked. The same spreadsheet will be used to monitor the volume of ABS-18 affidavits issued and returned. First-pass acceptance rates for absentee ballots will be evaluated using data documented in SVRS records, and informal feedback will be collected from voters and staff regarding the clarity and usefulness of the materials. A measurable reduction in preventable absentee errors will indicate that the problem has been effectively addressed. These metrics provide objective evidence that voter education improved system performance and preserved voter intent.

CEATS PRINCIPLES AND TOOLS

This project is grounded in the CEATS framework that elections are not a single event, but a complex, interdependent system of processes that must work together to ensure accuracy, access, and trust. The absentee voting errors observed in Lake County—missing signatures, invalid dates, and signature mismatches—are not isolated mistakes. They are predictable system failures that occur at specific points in the election lifecycle. CEATS training provided both the conceptual foundation and the practical tools needed to identify these breakdowns and design a meaningful intervention.

At its core, this project is guided by the principle of **election integrity**. Every eligible vote should be cast and counted lawfully and accurately. By reducing preventable absentee ballot errors, this project directly supports that goal. It reframes small voter mistakes as risks to system performance and legitimacy, rather than as personal shortcomings. The educational materials are designed to preserve voter intent while maintaining statutory compliance.

Equally central is **voter confidence**. CEATS emphasizes that trust in elections is built through transparency and understanding. When voters know what is required, why it matters, and what happens if something goes wrong, the process becomes accessible rather than intimidating. This project transforms complex statutory procedures into clear, human-centered guidance, particularly for seniors, Travel Board voters, and Voters with Print Disabilities. In doing so, it advances the HAVA principle that accessibility and equity are not optional—they are essential to democratic participation.

The project also reflects CEATS' emphasis on **process-oriented election administration**. Instructions on the election calendar, voter registration workflows, absentee ballot timelines, and post-election procedures revealed how closely each stage depends on the last. Flowcharting and process mapping—tools commonly used by election administrators—were adapted to create voter-facing visuals that mirror how professionals diagnose inefficiencies. These tools allow voters to see where they are in the system and how one misstep can cascade into a rejected ballot.

Several CEATS tools directly shaped the structure and content of this project:

- **Statewide Voter Registration System (SVRS):** Understanding how SVRS serves as the authoritative source for signature comparison informed the emphasis on consistency across registration, application, and ballot.
- **Electronic Poll Books (ePBs):** Instruction on how voter data travels across platforms reinforced the importance of accuracy and continuity.
- **Election Calendars and Deadlines:** CEATS training on statutory timelines made clear that late errors are often unfixable. This shaped the project's repeated emphasis on applying early.

- **Signature Verification and Cure Procedures:** Knowledge of bipartisan review teams, ABS-18 affidavits, and post-election timelines shifted the focus from remediation to prevention.
- **Physical and Cybersecurity Concepts:** These lessons reframed voter errors as system vulnerabilities that can undermine public trust, reinforcing education as a form of risk mitigation.

Session content on the roles of the Indiana Secretary of State, the Election Assistance Commission, DHS, NASS, and NCSL further expanded this framework. CEATS demonstrated that election integrity is supported by a national ecosystem of standards, oversight, and public accountability. This project functions as a local extension of those principles. Just as public logic and accuracy testing builds confidence in voting systems, transparent absentee voting guidance builds confidence in the process. It translates institutional safeguards into voter understanding.

Finally, CEATS instructions on **ethics, integrity, and ongoing preparation** shaped the philosophical foundation of this work. Election administration is not seasonal-it is continuous. This project embodies that principle by treating voter education as a form of ethical preparation. Rather than responding after ballots are rejected, it prevents disenfranchisement before it occurs. It applies the same standards expected of election staff-accuracy, neutrality, clarity, and accountability-to the voter experience.

In this way, the project becomes more than an instructional guide. It operationalizes CEATS principles by:

- Protecting election integrity
- Increasing voter confidence
- Advancing accessibility and equity
- Reducing administrative burden
- Strengthening trust in outcomes

The result is a system-based, ethically grounded intervention that bridges professional election administration and public participation, turning CEATS training into measurable, voter-facing impact.

CONCLUSION

This project addressed a persistent problem in Lake County-preventable absentee ballot errors-by shifting the response from post-election remediation to proactive voter education. Rather than relying on cure procedures after a ballot becomes provisional, the county now has clear, accessible tools that intervene before mistakes occur. By translating statutory requirements and internal workflows into voter-friendly guidance, the project reduces confusion around signatures, dates, and deadlines and equips voters to complete the process correctly the first time.

The impact of this work extends beyond individual ballots. It preserves voter intent, strengthens confidence in the absentee voting process, and reduces administrative strain on election staff. What were once routine breakdowns in the system become opportunities for clarity and empowerment. The project demonstrates that education is not ancillary to election administration-it is a core integrity function.

Future work should include expanding distribution through senior centers, libraries, and disability service organizations; developing more short instructional videos linked by QR codes; and formally tracking error rates across multiple election cycles. Additional language translations and large-print formats would further advance accessibility.

As a next step, future work must extend beyond education alone. Legislative action is needed to address the structural pitfalls within the absentee ballot process. Clearer standards, improved consistency in review, and statutory safeguards could reduce preventable rejections and ensure that voters who act in good faith are not disenfranchised by ambiguity or procedural gaps.

The results of this project are immediately useful to Lake County and easily transferable to other jurisdictions. Any county experiencing absentee ballot errors can adapt this model to its own statutes and workflows. By treating voter mistakes as predictable system failures and addressing them through education, election offices can improve accuracy, efficiency, and trust, ensuring that more valid votes are counted and that voters leave the process confident in their participation.

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EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE

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