

My experience on the Marquette Absentee Voter Board
Leslie Warren
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I signed up to be an election worker this year for the first time. I was willing to take that risk in a pandemic because our democracy is under threat. I was inspired to apply after a conversation with ASNMU President Emma Drever, who has been working hard on campus to encourage voting and civic engagement. I decided that I should step up because many of the usual poll workers are older, putting them in higher risk categories for COVID-19.

After initially submitting an online form to the Michigan Secretary of State's office, I was contacted by the City of Marquette's Clerk's Office. Kyle Whitney, the Clerk, initially assigned me to be a poll worker at Precinct 7 in the YMCA, but contacted me on October 30 to ask if I would be willing to serve on the Absentee Voter Board instead. He warned me that being on the AVB would be a much longer day. Unlike the workers at polling sites, AVB workers and challengers are required to stay on site until the polls close at 8:00 pm. Because the people counting absentee ballots have access to actual voting trends, they are not allowed to communicate with the outside world (except the clerk's office) until the polls close. AVB workers were also required to have additional training, which was in person on October 31.

Twelve of us counted Marquette's absentee ballots on November 3, 2020. About half had previous experience. Some of the remainder of us had other election work experience. A couple of us were completely new to the process. I was surprised to see that three of us were librarians — Cathy Seblonka (retired from Peter White Public Library), Joanna Mitchell (retired from NMU), and me. Several others had other public sector careers, including teachers and police department employees. Although larger Michigan cities were allowed to start the counting process on November 2, Marquette fell just below the population threshold that was set by the state for early counting.

Fortunately we didn't have to take the time to verify signatures. That was already done by the clerk's office. They did it early so they could call voters if there was a problem. I'm also glad we had an electric envelope opener to get us started. Even with that, it took about an hour just to open the envelopes. The people with previous experience said that it would have taken at least three hours to open 6500+ envelopes by hand.

After opening envelopes, we had to have someone confirm that the ballot returned matched the ballot issued to the voter. That part had to be done without the election worker seeing the actual votes (the ballot is inside a secrecy sleeve inside the mailing envelope). A different worker (who doesn't see the envelope with the voter's name) then removed the ballot from the secrecy sleeve and detached the ballot number from the ballot. A third person ran the ballot through the tabulator after scanning the ballot for write in votes and problems that would keep the machine from reading the ballot (e.g., check marks instead of filling in the bubbles). If the voter used check marks or there was another reason that prevented the ballot from being machine readable, two people from different

political parties had to work together to copy the voter's choices onto a different ballot so that the machine could count it.

Some of the people and tasks shifted, but ballot secrecy was very important, especially in a small town. I recognized lots of voter names when I opened mailing envelopes, but I never saw their votes.

We had three challengers in the room with us. All were from the Republican Party. No others challengers asked to be there. They were allowed to observe and ask questions, as long as they didn't interrupt the work. They were very collegial and expressed that they were sorry they hadn't volunteered to work the election. They wanted to help when they saw how busy we were, but challengers are only allowed to watch. Like us, they weren't allowed to leave once they were in the room. They had to stay until the polls closed. One challenger started to leave the room around 7:50 pm, but was stopped by one of the AVB chairs. The challenger had to wait until 8:00 pm.

There were lots of checks throughout the process to verify that all the ballots were counted. At the end, we needed to have our ballot tabulation numbers match the number of ballots that were brought to us by the clerk. There are several places in the process for human (or machine) error, but there are checks to find that if it happens.

Being on the City of Marquette's Absentee Voter Board was exhausting. I started at 7 am and didn't get home until 2:30 am (and I was one of the first to leave). It was impossible to social distance. Everyone in the room, regardless of political party and regardless of role (election worker, challenger, clerk's office employee) worked relentlessly for 19+ hours to insure the integrity, privacy, and civility of our democratic process.

The inability to social distance and the long hours in a closed room with strangers made me grateful to have an N95 mask. NMU supplied me with two to help protect me during higher risk activity. The mask was more uncomfortable than looser fitting cloth ones that I typically wear, but not disruptively so. The snugness had the advantage of preventing my glasses from fogging. As an added safety precaution, I worked from home for the remainder of the week. I did not want to go back to my office on the NMU campus without giving contact tracers a little time to reach me if they discovered COVID exposure in the Absentee Voter Board room in Marquette's Senior Center in City Hall. All of us had our temperature checked before we entered the room and we all wore masks, but those safety measure have their limits.

My experience on the Absentee Voter Board has been particularly gratifying this week. I appreciate being able to contribute a firsthand perspective to social media conversations about counting absentee ballots. I'm glad that I can share my experience while the country waits for absentee ballots to be counted and while so many people in the Republican Party are alleging conspiracies and fraud in the absentee vote count across the country.

I plan to volunteer again to be an election worker. I have been encouraging others to do it too.