

Voting absentee just got harder

Applications no longer automatic

STATEWIDE

By KATHLEEN GRAY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Voters who use absentee ballots will have to make an extra effort to get their ballots for next year's elections, including the presidential election in November.

Clerks can no longer automatically mail applications to senior citizens and former absentee-ballot voters, under an appeals court ruling late last month. The ruling upheld a lower court decision in a case stemming from Detroit's 2005 election.

The ruling, however, left some clerks puzzled about whether they can use lists of voters who have asked to be

placed on a permanent absentee-ballot request list.

Several clerks said Tuesday that they fear some voters used to getting the ap-

lications — mostly senior citizens — will fall through the cracks.

"We're trying to encourage people to vote, and this is inhibiting it," said Macomb County Clerk Carmella Sabaugh. "Clerks will have to send out a letter asking people if they want to get on a permanent list, and that's just wasteful."

Even if residents say they want to be on such a list, it's not clear whether it would be legal.

Some clerks automatically send applications to any resident older than 60. Others send the applications to people who have voted by absentee ballot in previous elections or who request to be on the permanent list.

"When the law came out to allow people over the age of 60 to vote absentee, our City Council voted 25 years ago to send out applications to all our senior citizens," said Farmington Hills City Clerk Kathy Dornan, who sends out 14,500 applications each election.

As a result, Dornan said her

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staff of six employees is going to be inundated with calls from voters who want absentee ballots, which will have to be mailed one at a time, instead of at a much cheaper and more convenient bulk mail rate.

In Shelby Township, Clerk Terri Kowal, who has a list of about 6,000 people who have requested absentee ballot applications, said she finds it ironic that as a candidate, she could use her campaign-finance money to send out absentee ballot applications, but she can't as the local clerk.

Groups such as the League of Women Voters, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Demo-

cratic and Republican parties, or candidates could take over the duties of sending out absentee applications.

But Dornan worries that those groups will target voters who will support their preferred candidates, leaving others without ballot applications. (The League of Women Voters does not endorse candidates.)

On Monday, the Troy City Council voted to allow the clerk's office to continue automatically mailing absentee voter ballot applications, despite the court ruling.

"We believe in local control," said City Clerk Tonni Bartholomew, adding that she's concerned that if the 14,000 applications don't get mailed, fewer senior citizens will vote.

But pollsters said don't underestimate the persistence of senior citizen voters.

"People who want to vote are very smart and will figure out a way to get the ballot," said political consultant Tom Shields of the Marketing Resource Group of Lansing. "Senior citizens take great pride in never missing an election."

There also is legislation that has passed the House of Representatives in July that would allow clerks to automatically mail applications to eligible voters. But the measure hasn't been taken up in the state Senate.

Contact KATHLEEN GRAY at 313-223-4407 or gray@freepress.com. Staff writer Gina Damron contributed to this report.