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**SENATE BILL 5344**

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**State of Washington 64th Legislature 2015 Regular Session**

**By** Senators Hasegawa, Roach, Liias, Billig, Kohl-Welles, Jayapal, Chase, and Conway

AN ACT Relating to prepaid postage for primary and general election ballots; amending RCW 29A.04.420 and 29A.40.091; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The legislature finds that voting by mail has many advantages. However, the legislature also finds that the postage, while only a small amount, amounts to the poll tax for many of our citizens. The legislature finds that many citizens lack the necessary funds to purchase the necessary postage to return his or her ballot. The legislature further finds that in order to increase participation in our democracy, we must lower all barriers to participation in the democratic process. The legislature finds that voting should be free for all citizens.

**Sec.**  RCW 29A.04.420 and 2013 c 11 s 11 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) Whenever state officers or measures are voted upon at a state primary or general election held in an odd-numbered year under RCW 29A.04.321, the state of Washington shall assume a prorated share of the costs of that state primary or general election.

(2) The state shall reimburse counties for the cost of return postage on mail and absentee ballots for primary and general elections.

(3) Whenever a primary or vacancy election is held to fill a vacancy in the position of United States senator or United States representative under chapter 29A.28 RCW, the state of Washington shall assume a prorated share of the costs of that primary or vacancy election.

((~~(3)~~))(4) The county auditor shall apportion the state's share of these expenses when prorating election costs under RCW 29A.04.410 and shall file such expense claims with the secretary of state.

((~~(4)~~))(5) The secretary of state shall include in his or her biennial budget requests sufficient funds to carry out this section. Reimbursements for election costs shall be from appropriations specifically provided by law for that purpose.

**Sec.**  RCW 29A.40.091 and 2013 c 11 s 49 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) The county auditor shall send each voter a ballot, a security envelope in which to conceal the ballot after voting, a larger envelope in which to return the security envelope, a declaration that the voter must sign, and instructions on how to obtain information about the election, how to mark the ballot, and how to return the ballot to the county auditor.

(2) The voter must swear under penalty of perjury that he or she meets the qualifications to vote, and has not voted in any other jurisdiction at this election. The declaration must clearly inform the voter that it is illegal to vote if he or she is not a United States citizen; it is illegal to vote if he or she has been convicted of a felony and has not had his or her voting rights restored; and it is illegal to cast a ballot or sign a ballot declaration on behalf of another voter. The ballot materials must provide space for the voter to sign the declaration, indicate the date on which the ballot was voted, and include a telephone number.

(3) For overseas and service voters, the signed declaration constitutes the equivalent of a voter registration. Return envelopes for overseas and service voters must enable the ballot to be returned postage free if mailed through the United States postal service, United States armed forces postal service, or the postal service of a United States foreign embassy under 39 U.S.C. 3406.

(4) The voter must be instructed to either return the ballot to the county auditor no later than 8:00 p.m. the day of the election or primary, or mail the ballot to the county auditor with a postmark no later than the day of the election or primary. Return envelopes for primary and general election ballots must include prepaid postage. Service and overseas voters must be provided with instructions and a privacy sheet for returning the ballot and signed declaration by fax or email. A voted ballot and signed declaration returned by fax or email must be received by 8:00 p.m. on the day of the election or primary.

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