

Elections Committee
Brooklyn Public Hearing
July 28, 2021
Testimony
Bonnie R. Nelson

My name is Bonnie Nelson and I wish to testify about how poorly absentee ballots are handled by the New York City Board of Elections.

My mother-in-law, Ann Nelson, is 97 years old and has difficulty walking, so for the past several years she has voted by absentee ballot, with the ballot being automatically mailed to her home. During the primary election in June she was undergoing physical rehabilitation in a short-term rehab facility in Greenwich Village. I was collecting her mail and when her absentee ballot arrived I brought it to her since she was very anxious to vote—having rarely, if ever, missed an election.

With some difficulty (her eyesight is not great and her hand is a little shaky), she filled out her ballot and the ballot envelope during the Early Voting period and entrusted it to me to return. I decided that, rather than trust the mails, I would deliver her ballot to an Early Voting poll site. The Board of Elections website said that absentee ballots could be returned to any EV site. It turned out to be most convenient for me to deliver my mother-in-law's ballot to the EV site at Sanders Studios in Brooklyn late in the day on Thursday, June 17. A very nice poll worker met me, asked me if the envelope was filled out correctly and then checked herself. She then took the ballot—assuring me it would go to the right place.

A few days later I started checking to see if her ballot had been accepted, but the status never changed from “Out for Delivery.” That’s what it says to this day.

Finally, on Friday afternoon, July 2, I called the Board of Elections main office in Manhattan to see if I could find out what happened to my mother-in-law's absentee ballot. The person who answered the phone there told me I had made a mistake in bringing the ballot for a Manhattan resident to Brooklyn and that I should be contacting the Brooklyn BOE office, but when I insisted that I had done the correct thing, he transferred me to an extension where no one answered the phone. I decided next to call the Brooklyn BOE office. There, the person who answered the phone said that he thought that everyone was already “heading out” (it was about 3:30 or 4:00 on the Friday before the Fourth of July) but that he would transfer me to someone who could help who might still be around. Again, no one answered the phone. I did leave a telephone message on an answering machine either in Manhattan or Brooklyn, but no one ever got back to me.

I did not have time to call the Board of Elections again so I have no idea if my mother-in-law's ballot was ever counted. I haven't had the heart to tell her that maybe she wasted her time in filling out her absentee ballot.

It's distressing that this one ballot was apparently lost (if it was—perhaps the ballot was counted but the envelope was never scanned). It's concerning to think that perhaps there might be a whole box of missing absentee ballots from that polling place, or that perhaps some or all ballots delivered in the “wrong” borough never made it to the correct office to be counted. But it's perhaps even worse that there was no way for me to find out what happened to the ballot because the staff I communicated with could not or did not try to figure out what went wrong.