

# Shelter Issues - Address Documentation and Mail

## Needing an Address for Documentation or Services

If you are staying at a shelter, you can use the address of the shelter to get two important documents: an identification card and a letter showing proof of residence. These two documents show that you live in Wisconsin and can be used when filling out important documents, such as when registering to vote or applying for benefits.

### Drivers license or identification card

If you do not have a permanent address, you can choose a place you regularly stay as your address for your state ID. This place could be a shelter or another spot where you spend time and can receive mail.

- **Proof of residence:** When you apply for your ID, you will need to show proof of residence. This means you need to give them a letter that shows you have a connection to the shelter that is giving you a place to stay temporarily. This letter should be from someone who works at the shelter and should say your name and explain where you stay. It must be on official letter paper and signed by someone from the shelter or agency. A sample letter can be found on the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) website:  
<https://wisconsindot.gov/Documents/dmv/shared/homeless-residency.pdf>
- **Getting your ID in the mail:** Make sure that the address on the letter is one at which you can receive mail. When you apply for a Wisconsin driver's license or ID, the state will mail your identification card to the address of the shelter written on the letter. When the card arrives, the staff at the shelter should give

it to you the next time they see you. If you are no longer staying there and the staff isn't able to get in contact with you, they should send it back to the Wisconsin DOT.

## **Registering to Vote**

If you want to vote in Wisconsin, you need to first register to vote. All voters must provide proof of residence when registering.

To show proof of residence, you will need to bring a document that has your name and your current address. You can use a shelter's address as your current address, even if they have rules against using their address as a residential address in other situations. You can't use a P.O. Box address or Safe at Home address when registering to vote.

If you are staying at a shelter, you have three options to show proof of residence:

1. A valid Wisconsin Drivers License with the shelter's address (This will still work even if your license is suspended or revoked, as long as it is not expired)
2. A valid state-issued identification card with the shelter's address
3. A letter from a shelter you are staying at, explaining that you live there

You can mail these to the municipal clerk or bring them in person as hard copies, or as a digital option on your phone or other device. However, some registration locations do not provide internet, so it is a good idea to download your proof of residence ahead of time.

Information about how to get these documents can be found under the section "Drivers license or identification card" above, or at

<https://wisconsindot.gov/Documents/dmv/shared/homeless-residency.pdf> (Wisconsin Department of Transportation)

## **Applying for State Benefits**

If you are living in a shelter and applying for benefits through the Wisconsin Department of Health's Division of Medicaid Services (DMS), such as BadgerCare

Plus, FoodShare, or state-funded SSI, you do not have to provide proof of your address. However, some programs might require you to certify that you live in Wisconsin and plan to continue to live in Wisconsin. (Wisconsin Department of Health)

## Getting mail at a shelter

If you are staying at a shelter, whether or not you can get mail delivered to you there depends on the shelter's policies. When you check into a shelter, you should ask shelter staff about the process for receiving your mail. For example, some shelters may only hold mail for a few days before returning it to the sender or limit the amount of mail you can receive at their address.

Here are some important things to know about getting mail at a shelter:

1. **Address Usage:** Shelters will typically allow you to use their address for receiving mail, but you may have to ask for permission first. It is a good idea to speak to someone who works at the shelter to understand how things work at your shelter, especially if you are expecting something important in the mail.
2. **Mail Pickup:** Shelters may have specific procedures for mail delivery and pickup. For example, some shelters require you to pick up your mail at the front desk within a certain number of days, or else they will return it to the sender.
3. **Confidentiality:** Your mail is private, and shelters are required to handle it confidentially. Shelter staff and other people staying at the shelter cannot open your mail.
4. **What can be delivered?** Many shelters will allow only mail, meaning letters sent through USPS, and not packages, magazine subscriptions, or items sent through other delivery services. If you need medicine or other medical equipment delivered to you, your shelter might be able to make an exception, even if they have a "no packages" policy.

Last updated on February 24, 2025.

What if I need something delivered in the mail, but I don't want it sent to the shelter I am staying at?

If you do not have a permanent address, there are a few other options for getting deliveries:

1. **General Delivery Service:** The U.S. Postal Service offers a free General Delivery service that allows you to receive mail at a local post office. Just go to your nearest post office and tell them you are interested in the General Delivery service. You can have your mail addressed to you, care of "General Delivery," at the post office closest to your shelter or current location. Then, you can go in person to the post office and pick up any mail that was sent to you.
2. **Mail Forwarding:** If you are staying at a shelter now, but expect to move soon or change addresses often, you can use the USPS Mail Forwarding service to make sure your mail follows you to your next location. You can do this in person at the post office or online.
3. **Shipping Companies:** Other shipping companies, such as UPS, have similar options available, depending on your location. However, these options usually come with a small fee.

I am worried that using the shelter address to receive mail will reveal my location and put me in danger. What should I do?

**Safe at Home:** If you are worried that getting mail sent to you at a shelter or other new address would put you in danger, Safe at Home is a program in Wisconsin that may be able to help. Safe at Home gives you a substitute address that you can use in place of your real address, so that people who may want to hurt you cannot find you as easily. This address can be used for receiving mail and filling out forms. Then, any mail that goes to your substitute address will be forwarded to your real one for free, keeping your real location a secret.

Safe at Home is not available to everyone. To join Safe at Home, all of the following things must be true about your situation:

1. You must be living in Wisconsin.
2. You must be a victim of abuse or threat of abuse, or live with someone who is a victim OR you must fear for your safety or the safety of your child.

3. The person who you are afraid of or who has abused you must not know where you live.
4. You must keep your real address a secret from the person who hurt or threatens you or your child.

For information about how to apply, you can visit the Wisconsin Department of Justice's website at <https://www.doj.state.wi.us/ocvs/safe-home> ("Safe At Home")

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