

Make Your Vote Count

By Jennifer G. Williams

Voting is a basic American right, but the very people whose lives are committed to preserving our rights often find their own votes excluded from the count.



U.S. Navy Lt. Steven Voris, voting assistance officer, left, assists Builder Constructionman Apprentice Chad Vick, center, and Steelworker Constructionman Recruit Christopher Cosgrove with their federal absentee ballots at their construction site on White Beach Naval Facility in Okinawa, Japan. U.S. Navy photo by Lt. Fred Kelly

“Service members may do exactly what they’re supposed to do, but then their absentee ballots may not be counted, often through no fault of their own,” said CAPT Samuel F. Wright, USN (Ret.), director of the Service Members Law Center for the Reserve Officers Association.

Wright has undertaken a nationwide campaign to reform absentee voting laws and procedures to ensure all overseas military members and their families have their votes counted. “We are basically still using the same procedures for absentee voting that we used during the Korean War,” he said. And this old-fashioned method is falling behind today’s fast-paced election cycles.

“There are still three time-consuming steps that we use for absentee voting,” Wright explained. “One, the service member mails in a request for an absentee ballot; two, the service member receives the unmarked ballot from their local election officials; and three, the service member mails back the marked ballot to election officials.”

And while that process will work in a perfect world, there are often extenuating circumstances that make its execution more difficult, if not impossible, for members of the military and their families overseas.

“For example,” said Wright, “this year (2010), there are 12 or 13 states holding primaries in September.” With a Federal law that requires states to mail out requested absentee ballots at least 45 days in advance of an election, that means the ballots for the November election must have been mailed by Sept. 18. That makes things very difficult for those people who are waiting to get their ballots through snail mail, said Wright.

“There are ways to expedite mailing back an absentee ballot once the service member receives and marks it,” he said. “But the really slow part of the process is mailing the blank ballot to the service member, because almost by definition, that voter is on the move as

part of the U.S. military, so the paper ballot is trying to catch up to the service member.”

The answer, said Wright, is using the same technologies that the military, government and regular Joes use every day. “There’s still a lot of resistance to electronic voting, but if we could just get the first two steps of the process done electronically, it would make a world of difference,” he said.

To ensure their vote is counted, Wright suggests the following for service members and their family members who are registered to vote:

1. Make sure you request your absentee ballot as soon as possible. “If you haven’t already done so, make sure you do it right now,” said Wright. “You cannot blame election officials if you haven’t even registered to vote or requested your ballot.” Visit www.fvap.gov

to register to vote or to make your request through the Federal Voting Assistance Program. But even using the website, most voters still need to download and print out their request form before mailing it to their local election official. The FVAP website recommends overseas voters request absentee ballots in January of each year, but Wright notes that is not always practical for military families, who often move without much notice. Some states can even email your blank absentee ballot (ensuring you get it right away) if you provide a valid email address in your request.

reason to discount your ballot,” he said. And even if you’ve already completed and sent back your write-in ballot, Wright says to go ahead and complete and send back your regular ballot—even if it doesn’t arrive until after the election. “For one thing, it will make a point at how slow the current system can be, but also, many states

allow for counting absentee ballots for a certain time after the actual election date,” he said. And sending both back will not mean you are illegally voting twice, said Wright. “Local election officials will discount your write-in ballot in favor of your regular absentee ballot,” he said. “It’s more like insurance that your vote will count.” ●

2. If you do not receive your requested absentee ballot within a few weeks of the election, you can still vote by using the back-up Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB), which also can be requested at www.fvap.gov (but again, still needs to be filled out, signed and mailed back to your local election official). Some states may require special procedures for this ballot, such as getting it notarized, so be sure to check your state’s requirements on the website. Wright calls this ballot an insurance plan, and says to go ahead and mail back your completed regular ballot once you get it. The FWAB is blank and only provides for federal elections, but a few states allow their local elections to be counted on the form. “And if you don’t know the person’s name you want, there is a box you can check to vote a party line,” he said.

3. Finally, Wright suggests you follow instructions carefully on your paper absentee ballot and mail it back with time to spare. “Don’t give election officials any