



RUTH JOHNSON
Michigan Secretary of State

Testimony - Committee on House Administration
U.S. House of Representatives

November 20, 2013

**Madam Chair and honorable members of the
Committee on House Administration:**

Thank you for your interest in improving overseas voting and the opportunity to discuss, via written testimony, progress that is being made in Michigan and the challenges that remain for our military personnel as it concerns elections.

As a nation, we have a duty to ensure the brave men and women protecting democracy around the world can participate in it here at home.

As they fight for us, we need to fight for them by safeguarding one of their fundamental freedoms and guaranteeing their voice is heard on Election Day. Their vote – like the vote of all Americans – must count.

That has long been the goal of **OPERATION: OUR TROOPS COUNT**, a campaign I founded with two other county clerks in 2009 when I was serving as Michigan's Oakland County clerk.

As you know, the **Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act** (or MOVE Act) was passed in 2009 and began implementation in 2010. Concurrently, we successfully pushed for state law changes to implement the MOVE Act and streamline military voting by allowing local clerks to email absentee ballots to overseas military personnel, reducing mailing delays. These changes were codified as part of federal law.

In 2012, as Michigan's secretary of state, I was part of a bipartisan delegation of State Chief Election Officers who travelled to the Middle East to meet with troops, military voting representatives and U.S. Embassy officials to examine absentee voting issues. Sponsored by the Department of Defense, the trip included visits to military installations in Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. *(Please see attached report.)*

My testimony today is a reflection of the insights gained from that trip, underscored by national trends with military and overseas voting and perspectives from efforts we have launched in Michigan.

STATISTICS

I believe the Federal Voting Assistance Program and the 2009 federal MOVE Act have been effective in reducing many obstacles encountered by military and overseas voters. In fact, I am encouraged by the Overseas Vote Foundation report from earlier this year that found the number of military and overseas American voters who reported not receiving a ballot or receiving a ballot too late had declined in last year's presidential election to one-fifth of those who voted compared to a full half surveyed after the 2008 election.

(https://www.overseasvotefoundation.org/files/OVF_ElectionReport_2013_web.pdf)

However, it is clear there are still challenges that impact voter participation – challenges that range from communication issues to computer access, especially in combat zones.

In terms of national voting trends, according to the Federal Voting Assistance Program:

- 79 percent of active duty military members were registered to vote in 2012 compared to 77 percent in 2008.
- Of those, 55 percent voted in the 2012 general election, compared to 53 percent in 2008.

Here in Michigan, our statistics reflect the interest in what was a historic election in 2008 and the need to do better in encouraging the return of ballots from our military personnel and overseas voters:

- In 2008, of 12,840 ballots sent to military and overseas voters; 10,483 or 81.6 percent returned.
- In 2010, of 2,571 ballots sent to military and overseas; 1,963 or 76.3 percent returned.
- In 2012, of 9,367 ballots sent to military and overseas voters; 7,272 or 77.6 percent returned.

MICHIGAN'S PROGRESS

Michigan has made incredible strides in the fight to safeguard the votes of military personnel stationed abroad and all overseas voters. As Chairperson Miller knows, Michigan is unusual when it comes to elections because we have a rare, decentralized system in which 1,600 local and county clerks are actually responsible for overseeing and administering elections.

Some of our strong measures include:

- Comprehensive training and education efforts targeting our clerks paired with strong tracking to ensure local clerks send out absentee ballots to military and overseas voters 45 days prior to elections, as required by law.
 - While more than 98 percent of our local clerks adhere to this requirement, in 2012 some failed to meet the November election deadline, despite repeated reminders and warnings.
 - To protect the vote of our military and overseas voters, Attorney General Bill Schuette and I filed suit against those 24 communities to require the clerks to extend the deadline for acceptance and counting the ballots that were not sent by the deadline. (http://www.michigan.gov/sos/0,4670,7-127-1640_9150-288203--,00.html.) Later, we successfully initiated State legislation to codify those changes.
- Improvements to our e-ballot delivery system to make it easier for clerks to send e-ballots to absentee voters. This cuts traditional mailing time in half.
- Improved the electronic ballot developed for voters covered by the MOVE Act. The process used by military/overseas voters was streamlined considerably and these voters were given the ability to mark their ballots online (eliminating the possibility of over-voting) before printing and returning the ballot to the local clerk.
- Expansion of our online Michigan Voter Information Center (MVIC) (www.michigan.gov/vote) which is now smartphone-friendly. Users can access contact information for their local clerks, confirm they are registered to vote, view sample ballots (which is extremely helpful if they vote via a Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot) and find important links to websites for military and overseas voters.

- With a \$430,000 grant from the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP), we enhanced our program that allows election officials to electronically create and transmit ballots to provide an online tracking system that all absentee voters can use to view the status of their absentee ballot request, their ballot transmittal from the clerk's office and the receipt of their voted ballot back to the clerk's office.
- Streamlined FVAP data requests and the Election Administration and Voting Survey data collection process provided by the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) to better ensure every jurisdiction properly categorizes and reports on the issuance and return of military/overseas ballots. We go through an intense data collection process with clerks statewide every two years to fulfill these data requests from the federal government.
- Obtained the email addresses of thousands of military/overseas voters which will enable our Bureau of Elections to more effectively communicate with these voters.
- Pushed for law changes in 2012 that now allow military and overseas voters to have a say in local and state elections by expanding the use of the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot.
- Launched a special military/overseas webpage for voters at:
<http://www.michigan.gov/sos/0,1607,7-127-1633-238835--,00.html>.
- Launched a webpage for clerks who are assisting military personnel (including a detailed new manual for issuing and tracking military/overseas ballots) at: http://www.michigan.gov/sos/0,4670,7-127-1633_11976_62664---,00.html.

ACTION STEPS

The bipartisan delegation of State Chief Election Officers, who visited with election officials, outreach coordinators, U.S. embassy officials and troops in the Middle East, prepared a report with recommendations. The report indicated that voter outreach efforts at military installations appear “to be very effective” and “it seems highly unlikely that any particular service member would not have been exposed to voting assistance messaging.”

We found during our Department of Defense tour that efforts are being made and noted that we want to explore further opportunities on how states can work with the DOD, FVAP and the State Department to improve the policies and procedures for military and overseas voters while maintaining security and integrity in the electoral process.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Members of the committee, there may be a workable solution and I would ask that federal officials explore a core recommendation of the delegation to tap the technology of the military's "**Common Access Cards**" for military voting.

Technology is key to improving the return rate for overseas ballots. Michigan has successfully used electronic means to transmit absentee ballots to military and overseas voters for some time. Like many states, Michigan does not allow voted ballots to be sent back electronically due to security and election integrity concerns.

The CAC card, however, is an established tool for standard identification of active-duty military personnel, DOD civilian employees and eligible contract personnel. The card is required, for example, to access defense networks and systems. Military personnel use the CAC system to routinely and securely sign and transmit even high security clearance documents. These cards could provide a sufficient means of establishing voter identity and a secure method of transmitting ballots electronically. Again, I would urge federal officials to explore whether this is a feasible, secure option for use nation-wide.

Again, I want to thank Chairperson Miller and the Committee for the opportunity to be heard via written testimony. I believe it is critical – both morally and legally – to ensure U.S. citizens can vote from all four corners of the world.