

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BOB CAREY, DIRECTOR,
FEDERAL VOTING ASSISTANCE PROGRAM, VIA TELECONFERENCE SUBJECT: ABSENTEE
VOTING WEEK TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2010

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PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense
Public Affairs): Hello. I 'd welcome you all to the Department of
Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Wednesday, September 29th, 2010. My
name is Petty Officer William Selby, with the Office of the Secretary of
Defense-Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating our call today.

A note to our bloggers on the line today: please remember to
clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your
question. Respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct and to
the point.

Today our guest is Mr. Bob Carey, director of the Federal Voting
Assistance Program. Mr. Carey will discuss the Department of Defense's
efforts with the Federal Voting Assistance Program to encourage military
personnel and their family members to exercise their right to vote. And
sir, with that, if you have an opening statement, you can go ahead with
that now.

MR. CAREY: Thank you very much.

With 34 days before the election, now is the time for voters to
be looking at how they're going to get their ballot and get it back. We
chose this week as Absentee Voting Week because we want voters to be
thinking about it now. Too often, voters don't think about this until
the week before the election, in which case, for military and overseas
voters, it's too late.

But we're trying to make this process as easy as possible, and
the biggest thing I could really use your all's help on is getting the
word out to military and overseas voters about the availability of
FVAP.gov and the tools on it. Specifically, we have taken almost every
single part of this voting process and automated it, much like you would
TurboTax with a 1040 form.

I don't know how many of us still fill out our taxes by hand. Why should we be doing the same thing with our complex voting forms?

What we have done at FVAP.gov is that we've taken the voter registration and absentee ballot application process, the ballot receipt process and even the ballot marking process, automated it so the voter can quickly, intuitively, seamlessly and easily navigate that process from one website, and be able to get to the information they need in a way that allows them to fill out the form quickly and correctly.

We not only -- you know, we're trying to change FVAP from an agency to a portal. And the way we're trying to do that is when states have their own systems -- and remember, all these elections are run at the state, county and municipal level. There are no federally run elections; they're all run at the state, county and municipal level. So it can be very complex for the voter to be able to navigate that, and we're trying to be able to take that process and make it easy for them to navigate it by doing all that homework for them.

So the voter goes to our website, and at the state -- if their state has their own system, then we provide the voter the direct link to that state-run system. Because a state-run system's always going to be better than the federal-run system.

So if we can just get the word out to folks, especially the military, the military dependents, and the overseas -- and the overseas civilians that these tools are available, they're easy, quick, and they're -- and they're intuitive, hopefully we'll be able to increase dramatically the voters' success in this election cycle.

I'm open for questions. PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much, sir. And did anybody else join us? (No audible response.) Okay.

Well, Clyde, you were first on the line, so you can go with your question.

Q Great. Thank you.

Sir, my question's a little bit of a variation on a theme, that the MOVE Act -- Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act -- provides some very strict and confined bases for a state to get an exemption from the 45-day rule, where absentee ballots seem to be sent out.

And it seems as if in this early stages of implementation of the MOVE Act, that states are getting exemptions for things not envisioned by the act. For example, the State of Delaware asked for an exemption based upon the possibility of there needing to be a post-primary recount.

Do you see your activities in any way hampered by the flexibility being given by the U.S. Department of Justice in granting exemptions to states under the MOVE Act?

MR. CAREY: The Department of Justice is not the one that grants the exemption under the MOVE Act. It's the Department of Defense, after consultation with the Department of Justice.

The problem with being able to discuss this at this point is that the -- anything that is said regarding a waiver granted or a waiver denied could impact future -- (word inaudible).

To the extent that you're concerned that the waivers may -- may be reducing the opportunity for military voters, my discussing the waivers at this point may very well, you know, impede the ability of the Department of Justice to effectively enforce this in the future. And so I think you can understand that I'm -- I'm really not at liberty to discuss the particulars of the individual waivers.

You know, we posted online at FVAP.gov not only the Department of Defense's response to each of the 11 waiver applicant states and territories as to what our response was, but we also posted the states' communications with us, their initial application, their follow-on communications with us. And then for the states that were granted waivers we've posted online our post-waiver reporting and compliance requirements and the states' responses, and for the states not granted a waiver, the memorandum of agreement with the Department of Justice and those states, or the consent decrees that spell out what those states are required to do in order to be able to provide voters adequate time to receive, vote, and return their ballots.

So, you know, we have a lot of -- a lot of data available online, and you know, unfortunately, I need to let that speak for itself.
Q I understand.

Thank you.

MR. CAREY: I mean, what we can really use, you know, to the extent that you're concerned that a voter is not going to have adequate time to receive, vote and return their ballots, one of the ways that you can help the voter to get adequate time to receive, vote and return their ballots is to talk to them about our online tools.

Talk to them about how these online tools allow them to complete their registration and absentee ballot application in five minutes. How it allows them to complete a ballot in about seven to 10 minutes. If California was participating, it might be three and half hours, because they have a pretty long ballot, but otherwise, the voters can --

A voter can really -- and we have 30 states that either -- that have systems either online right now or coming online this week that allow the voter to be able to see their ballot online. Bexar County, Texas, San Antonio, sent out their ballots by e-mail on Saturday, last Saturday, the 18th. Now, a lot of these ballots went by e-mail to overseas military personnel.

For overseas military, the military postal system is express-mailing back all those ballots. So Bexar County, Texas, sent out these -

- these ballots on Saturday. And on Tuesday, they had two of them from Korea back in San Antonio. Why? Because we're trying -- we're trying to substantially reduce the time it takes for these -- for this process to work. But the voter's got to hear about it.

Delaware. Delaware sent out half of its ballots using the FVAP-sponsored online ballot delivery and marking wizard on Saturday. They had ballots back the next day, because they allowed voters to be able to e-mail back those ballots.

But the voter has to know about FVAP.gov in order that they'll get access to these tools, and you can help that.

Q Great. I plan to. Thank you.

MR. CAREY: That's good. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, sir. And Beth. STAFF: Did we lose Beth?

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Beth? Hmm. I think we may have lost here.

Clyde, can you go ahead and ask another question and I'm going to go ahead and get Beth back on the line?

Q Okay, sure. Thank you for that.

You stated, Mr. Carey, that you have 30 states online right now. And you're hoping, I presume, for universal coverage, which would be not only the 50 states but the various territories and possessions and so, including the District.

What is your time frame for achieving that, perhaps by the 2012 election?

MR. CAREY: Well, the MOVE Act only requires states to transmit blank ballots electronically. And electronically could be facsimile; it could be e-mail. So -- all the states are transmitting the ballot electronically, so many of them are doing it by e-mail. What I'm trying to say -- and that's not really something that we can link to from our website.

One of the things that, you know, I think we need to remember is that the Constitution guarantees the states the right to run their elections the way they want. And so, you know, the states, at this point, are going to be the best ones to determine how they should have their online systems, if they want to do that rather than doing e-mail, or in addition to e-mail. So we want to be able to encourage the states to be able to do that.

Now, here's another thing, though. For all 55 states and territories we have a back-up ballot called a federal write-in absentee

ballot. And by federal law, those states and territories must accept that ballot.

Now, on our website we have an online wizard where we populate that ballot, with that wizard, with all the federal candidates. So a voter goes to Illinois and they get their Senate candidates and they get their House of Representatives candidates.

And then it also allows them to, you know, write in state and local candidates for the states that allow that as well. And we'll automatically populate the form for them with those state and -- the selected candidates, and then it'll give them specific instructions about how to send it back to their local election officials.

So we do have that for all -- I mean, we do have an online system for at least the federal elections for all 55 states and territories that the voter can get to from FVAP.gov. Q All right. So then -- and at the state level, I mean, you had mentioned kind of in passing that California's not yet participating. For all of the state-level -- both elections, propositions and so on -- do you foresee having all 55 states and territories participating in this at that level in some sort of time frame?

MR. CAREY: You know, that really needs to be, at this point, a decision made by the states. Because, you know, it may very well actually be that e-mail turns out to be -- I mean, this is the first year we're doing this election, that we're mandating the electronic transmission of the blank ballots.

Q Right.

MR. CAREY: And, you know, we're trying -- my hypothesis is that multiple electronic methods of transmission is preferable to a single electronic transmission method.

What we may very well find out is that e-mail is much more successful than online delivery, because people are just -- use e-mail much more, rather than having to go and try to pull it down from a website. Or we may find that online delivery is much more successful than e-mail.

We may -- my hypothesis is that facsimile is not that successful because most people don't have access to a fax machine, but who knows? Maybe the post-election data comes back and we find out that facsimile is the choice.

This is the first year we're doing this -- you know, this mandated and nationwide electronic transmission, and we've got to figure out from the data that we collect what's most effective.

So, you know, we -- I would just say that we need to have -- I think what would be not useful in the long run is to have a single, federal mandated system. I think that that will minimize the buy-in by

the states, and it would either provide the states as much latitude as possible on how to deploy a system that's unique for their states.

Q All right. Do you have any feel or any data historically about participation rates from -- you know, either overseas military folks or, you know, in total the 6 million people or so that are covered by this act? And then what your goals are for increasing that over time?

MR. CAREY: In 2008 the general population voter participation rate was just over 63 percent. In the military, it was about 53 percent.

But when we adjust for age and gender, because the military is much more male and much younger than the general population -- you know, 53 percent of the general population is over 45 years of age; only 5 percent of the military is over 45 years of age. When we -- when we normalize the military voter participation rates to the general population, the military voter participation rate is actually about 71 percent, higher than the general population.

But, you know, that's not the important element. What the important element is is a voter who says they want to vote should have an equal opportunity to be able to successfully cast that vote. And in 2008, 91 percent of the general population returned their absentee ballots. Only 63 percent of the military were able to successfully return their absentee ballots.

Our hypothesis is the number-one reason is because ballots in the past were sent out too late and it took too long for them to get to them. And it took too long for those ballots to get back. We're hoping that with the 45-day of prior transmission requirement, the electronic transmission requirement, the express mail return of ballots from overseas military, we're going to substantially reduce that total ballot transit time and increase that successful absentee ballot return rate.

That's going to be our major metric. You know, of the people that requested absentee ballots, how many of them were able to successfully cast that ballot? And we want to bring that up to the same rate as the general population. So that -- you know, those are sort of the numbers from 2008. The --

As far as the overseas civilian population, you know, it's hard to talk to computer (rates ?) when you don't know what the denominator is. And the problem is is we don't know if there's 2 million overseas Americans or 4 million overseas Americans, because there's absolutely no requirement that an overseas American register that they're overseas. And in many cases, they don't need to file taxes because they earn less than is the minimum necessary to have to file taxes.

So there may be a lot of people that we just don't know about overseas, or there may be a lot of people that, you know, are sort of -- you know, are -- haven't really participated in the American political process in a number of years and really don't have any interest in it.

We are -- one of our strategic goals for this -- for this election, for the 2012 election cycle, is to define that overseas American population, both in terms of total numbers and in demographic distribution. Because if they are very highly concentrated in urban areas, that may very well call for a voting solution for them that's along the lines of what Iraq did in placing, you know, ballot stations in embassies.

But if they're very dispersed geographically, then we'll need an even more remote absentee voting system for them, either through online transmission or, you know, express mail, et cetera. So, you know, it's difficult, but -- People have talked about a 6 percent overseas American voter participation rate. But, you know, we don't even know how many overseas Americans there are, so it's pretty difficult to -- you know, it may be precise, but I don't believe it's accurate.

Q All right. So now, it seems through all of this discussion that you may even be relying on U.S. Census data; you're certainly relying on participation by the Department of Justice for some of what you're doing.

How is this program being received as it kind of ripples through the federal government? You obviously need support from other groups in order to be as successful as you can be. Are you receiving all of the support that you need?

MR. CAREY: Yeah. The military services are -- you know, are very active in this. We recently -- you know, one of the requirements in the MOVE Act is that the installations also provide voting assistance -- (inaudible) -- it be established at all the installations, a separate voting assistance officer.

And the services have been deeply engaged in establishing those. We just recently did a training team where we sent out, to 36 military concentration areas, training teams. We probably hit about 250 installations overall, training them as to the requirements of this and how to set this up. We basically sent to them, you know, an installation voting-assistance-office-in-a-box and let them, hopefully, set it up, you know, just that quickly.

But then also we have a very close relationship with the Department of State. We meet with them regularly. We conduct voting assistance workshops with them overseas. Every single embassy and consulate has a voting assistance officer. They -- we coordinate with them on how to get the message out. They are active participants in our social media campaigns. They provide us access to their warden list, which is when people do register with the local State Department.

You know, there's probably a couple hundred thousand Americans living in Canada. I doubt many of them would go to Ottawa in order to be able to register, because, you know, they probably don't think about it that much.

Americans in, you know, a country that's war-torn, they're probably, you know, in very close coordination with the local embassy. So how much we can get out through the State Department varies, in large part, upon the -- country. And that's why I'm grateful that the department has placed the resources into the advertising and the marketing campaign this year that they have.

We're doing full-page ads in Military Times, Stars and Stripes, Military Spouse Magazine, International Herald Tribune. We're doing social media advertising on Facebook and search engines. All to be able to try to drive people to the FVAP.gov website and get them to use the tools.

One other thing that people, you know, oftentimes miss is that the military spouse has the same federal voting rights under this law as the military member themselves. But because they don't have, you know, easy access to the unit, they may not have a great of access to that voting assistance. So we're trying to get them to understand that there is also assistance online for them, as well as assistance at the installation's voting assistance office.

And that's another -- that's another key component of the military and overseas voting population that we're really trying to target this year, along with the 18-to-24-year-olds, in order to be able to make sure that they have, you know, the complete opportunity to be able to successfully cast those ballots.

Q All right. I am on the FVAP.gov website, and, you know, I'm certainly going to go through this and present it to my readers and listeners. Do you have a fact sheet, either on this website or something else available that we could rely on for some statistics?

MR. CAREY: Yeah. We can probably get you some stuff together. I think we have -- (word inaudible) -- readily available.

Q Great.

MR. CAREY: It just may be -- when you signed up, did you put your e-mail address in there?

Q For this call?

MR. CAREY: Yeah. I don't know if we have your e-mail address or not.

Q Yeah. Yes, you do. But I'll give it to you right now. It's Clyde, C-l-y-d-e, @libertypundits.com.

MR. CAREY: Okay.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And sir, I have a question. Beth was not able to come back on the line, but I have a question of my own, actually. Could you -- could you talk about or discuss your -- the outlook for this year's elections as far as your expectations for the -- for voter turnout

with all these new strategies in line? How do you think it's going to turn out?

MR. CAREY: Again, we're trying to get away from voter turnout, because our hypothesis is that the military is representative of the United States as a whole. And, you know, when we looked at previous election cycles and we measured -- and we surveyed people as to what their interest level was in elections, it was pretty much the same level of interest as the general population. So, you know, all the time in off-year elections, non-presidential-year elections, there's a lower voter -- it is lower voter participation. In 2006, the general voter -- the general population's voter participation rate was 40 percent. The -- in 2008, the general population's voter participation rate was 63 percent, just over 63 percent. So -- and that always -- you know, it always drops in the non-election years.

What we want to make sure is that that voter success rate is as close as possible or exceeds that of the general population. You know, we're finding -- in 2008 we had about 20,000 people use our online registration and absentee ballot application -- 21,000, for the entire election cycle.

In 2010, we've already -- as of Saturday, we had 61,000 that had used it.

In 2006, 1,400 federal write-in absentee ballots were cast nationwide. Nationwide. Only, you know, 1,400 of those back-up ballots were cast nationwide. We've already had, as of Saturday, 2,000 people use our online federal write-in absentee ballot tool. And I think that's going to dramatically increase as the word starts getting out and the -- and as we get closer to the election.

So, you know, in those regards, we're encouraged. There was a change to the law that's -- in the past, if a local election official received an absentee ballot application from a military overseas voter, they had to automatically send that absentee ballot to the voter for the next two election cycles. That was repealed in -- Congress repealed that in 2009. And so, you know, there was a lot of purging of voter rolls because of that.

And so a lot of people that may have automatically -- and thought they were going to automatically receive their ballots may not. And so we've really been trying to encourage everyone, trying to tell them the law changed. Send in a new federal postcard application. We're telling everyone to send in a new federal postcard application each and every year, regardless.

And so -- and it's not too late. People can still send in their federal postcard applications and register to vote and request an absentee ballot. They've just got to do it now.

Q Do you have a site on that 2009 repeal, what act that was or what it was attached to?

MR. CAREY: The Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act, the MOVE Act that was part of the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act enacted October 28, 2009.

The section of the -- what that did is it amended the Uniform and Overseas Citizen Absentee Voting Act, otherwise known as UOCAVA. And specifically it -- the sections that were repealed were Sections 104(a) through (d) of UOCAVA. And that's 43 U.S.C. 1977ff.

Q Great. Thank you very much. PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that, sir. And Clyde, did you have any more questions?

Q No, I don't right now. I think I've got a lot of good information to share with my readers and listeners. I'll look forward to that fact sheet, and I'll copy you guys back on what we publish.

MR. CAREY: Just to make sure we give you what you need, what exactly do you want in the fact sheet?

Q Well, there was -- there was a lot of statistics that we're looking at here, and, you know, in some sense perhaps your own words about what your goals are for the program here. I can certainly paraphrase through this, but I think sending something out to our folks is a little bit more force and effect, when, you know, here's the stated goal of the program. That type of thing.

I will go through the website in detail and will pull off things from there. But if you have other positions or facts you want to share, you know, normalizing participation for age and gender -- I think the military's in great shape, but if you've got some additional things that you want to share, it's mainly an opportunity to do that.

Q You know, I do have one other question, if I may.

We have sat back here as political commentators to the 2008, even the 2004 and 2000 presidential elections. And counting military absentee ballots has been almost -- I don't want to -- (inaudible) -- game, because it's much more serious than that. But it's like discounting it because of, you know, this box not being checked, and so on.

By us going through a system like this where it's all done online, which presumably there's, you know, error checking and so on, do you hope as well to minimize the instance of where an absentee ballot will in fact not be counted, and will get --

MR. CAREY: Yeah, definitely. Definitely. Yeah, that's a huge issue.

In the 2008 election we found wide variance in the rejection rate for federal write-in absentee ballots. And I think a lot of that is that the local election officials just aren't used to them, because they hadn't been used in the past. My goal is that they get really used to them this election cycle.

But, you know, we found some election jurisdictions that had zero rejection rate of federal write-in absentee ballots. We had other jurisdictions where we found, you know, very large rejection rates.

Now, part of the reason that there may have been large rejection rates is that the federal write-in absentee ballot may have arrived too late to be counted. I mean, probably more than half of the total military ballot rejection problem is because ballots arrive after the deadline. And, you know, once it's late, that's pretty much a fatal error, a fatal flaw. You're not going to be able to correct for that unless the state law says -- unless the states extend the time that they allow for the ballot to come back.

Hopefully, we're going to also reduce that just because we're getting the ballot out earlier. We're getting it out electronically. You know, we're taking that 30- to 40-day -- or, 20- to 30-day process of sending a ballot to someone, and by transmitting it electronically we're reducing it to 20 to 30 milliseconds. And then with the express mail return, you know, hopefully we're reducing it on both sides so there's a lot more time for the ballot to get back in time.

But -- you know, and people hear of, you know, what they believe is the unjustifiable rejection of military overseas ballots, tell us about it. Tell us about it. (Laughter.) We'll -- you know, we'll try to get involved.

Q Great. Great. Wonderful. Well, you know, I do appreciate the time here and the ability to ask a number of questions. I think this is incredibly important and something that needs to be done. And, you know, I'll tell you, from the research I did before the call and now while we're sitting here talking, it looks like you guys are really doing it right. I appreciate that.

MR. CAREY: Well, good. I'm glad to hear that. And -- but it doesn't matter if the people don't know about it and the people don't use it. So to the extent you can try to -- you know, just -- you know how it works with Google Search. Put a lot of links in and that just (rides/rise) up our Google metrics. (Laughter, cross talk.) People -- you know, we want to be number one. If someone Googles military voting, we're already number one.

But, you know, we want it to jump out of the screen, grab them by the throat and tell them, get your ballot in now! (Laughter.)

Q Right. We'll do everything we can for you, boss.

MR. CAREY: Thank you very much.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that, sir. And thank you very much for your questions, Clyde, and also, sir, for your answers today.

That about wraps up today's call, unless you -- do you have any closing remarks you'd like to say, Mr. Carey?

MR. CAREY: Well, first, Clyde, when do you think you're going to post?

Q I'm going to do it in two stages. I will wait for your fact sheet, and then I will do my written post. I have a podcast which goes out and I've got worldwide listenership on that, including a lot of guys in theater, men and women in theater. And I publish that on Tuesdays and Fridays, so I'm going to save this -- the audio portion of this and devote a whole segment to it on Friday's podcast.

MR. CAREY: Great.

And then my closing statement: FVAP.gov, FVAP.gov, FVAP.gov.
(Laughter.)

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that, sir.

Okay, well, today's program will be available online at the bloggers link on DODLive and .mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents such as the audio file and a print transcript.

Again, thank you very much, Mr. Carey, and thank you very much, Clyde, for your participation today. This concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at this time.

END.