

Absentee voting

Ensure your vote counts while deployed

by Army Sgt. Stephanie Carl, 17th Public Affairs Detachment, Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan

In just two three, voters nationwide will decide who will win the 2004 general election. With many service members and civilian employees deployed overseas, voting by absentee ballot is just as important to the election as the votes of those in the United States.

By registering with a Standard Form 76, Federal Post Card Application, U.S. citizens overseas can vote in elections held at their home of record for a period of one year. The only requirement is that you're a U.S. citizen who will be 18 years old on the date of the election.

"Once you fill out an SF-76, you send it back to the [United] States, where it gets approved by your local voting official," said Marine Maj. Bryan Carter, Coalition Joint Task Force-76 senior voting assistance officer. He said it's important to make sure all information on the card is correct.

Registration gives voters a voice regarding different laws being considered in their voting district and allows them to vote in elections at every level.

An alternative to the standard form is the online version of the application. The online version can be filled out on the Federal Voting Assistance Program's Web site at www.fvap.gov, printed and mailed to local voting officials.

After an official approves the registration form, the voter will receive ballots in the mail for every election held in the next year. Officials anticipate ballots for the presidential election to arrive sometime in September; however, those who want their vote counted shouldn't wait until the last minute to return their ballots.

"A big concern is that there are so many service members [and civilians] deployed right now," Major Carter said. "That's why there's so much of an emphasis on voting. Our elections aren't just about people; they're about taxes, bonds, referendums, schools, cities and counties." ❖



**ABSENTEE
IT'S YOUR VOTE**

New procedures speed absentee balloting

WASHINGTON — Absentee ballots from service members overseas will move faster and with greater control for the 2004 elections, Department of Defense and Postal Service officials said in June.

Charles Abell, principal deputy undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, and Paul Vogel, the Postal Service's vice president for network operations management, announced the changes made in the absentee balloting process.

Getting ready

"We've had a year of getting ready for the upcoming federal election, focusing on how we can help military people, their families and civilians overseas to exercise their right to vote," Mr. Abell said.

Improvements are needed "because it's important, especially with a presidential election year coming up," Mr. Vogel said. "If it's even as remotely close as the last election was, every ballot really counts."

The combined team put together a process that will expedite overseas absentee balloting mail flow and give greater accountability.

Essentially, the Postal Service will ask local postmasters to contact officials in counties that are responsible for mailing ballots.

"Traditionally, 30 to 45 days in advance of the elections, the blank ballots will be mailed out from those counties," Mr. Vogel said.

Local postmasters will take those ballots and sort them for three different destinations: San Francisco for service members based around the Pacific Rim, New York for Europe and the Middle East, and Miami for Central and South America. The materials will be mailed via the Postal Service's express mail service, Mr. Vogel said.

Once at these military mail "gateways," postal managers will log in the express mail pieces and sort them to the different military ZIP codes.

They will go into specially marked mail trays and given to the airlines. Airline workers will identify the trays that have voting materials, and those trays will again receive priority.

In theater, military postal officials will ensure balloting materials are given priority as they travel to the service member.

Once a service member votes, the reverse process is the same — balloting materials will receive priority.

Follow guidelines

To be on the safe side, DOD and Postal Service officials recommend service members and their families follow Federal Voting Assistance Program guidelines. The week of Sept. 6 has been designated as "Get Out the Vote Week." By then, "if service members haven't already requested their ballots, that's the week to do it," Mr. Abell said.

The week beginning Oct. 11 has been designated as "Overseas Voting Week."

"If you vote that week, your ballot should arrive before Election Day, which will qualify your ballot to be counted," Mr. Abell said.

Traditionally, service members and their families vote at a higher percentage than the general population. "We don't care how they vote, just so long as they do," Mr. Abell said.

10 steps to ensure your absentee vote is counted

- Contact your unit/embassy/organization voting assistance officer for help in absentee registration and voting
- Visit the Federal Voting Assistance Program's Web site at www.fvap.gov for information on the absentee registration and voting process
- Ensure you have applied for an absentee ballot using the hard copy or online versions of the federal post card application
- Make sure your local election official has your current mailing address
- Sign and date all election materials
- Fulfill your state's witness/notary requirements (if required)
- Ensure your ballot or post card application is postmarked
- Register to vote and request your ballot in a timely manner — not later than September
- VOTE — mail your ballot no later than Oct. 15
- Use the federal write-in absentee ballot if you're overseas and your state absentee ballot doesn't arrive in time to be mailed back by the state's deadline

For more info

Learn more about absentee voting by visiting the Air Force Personnel Center Web site at www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/votefund/ or the Federal Voting Assistance Program site at www.fvap.gov.