

# CHAPTER ONE

## VOTING ASSISTANCE OFFICERS - WHAT YOU SHOULD DO (AND NOT DO)

### I. The Voting Assistance Officer

As a Voting Assistance Officers (VAO), you aid in ensuring that citizens understand their voting rights and how to register and vote absentee under the *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA* - See Appendix A). The act requires each Federal department and agency with personnel covered by the *UOCAVA* to have a voting assistance program. The Federal Voting Assistance Program's (FVAP) biennial Voting Action Plan and the Department of Defense Directive 1000.4 (link available on the FVAP website at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov)) establish policy and guidelines for carrying out an effective voting assistance program.

Whether you are a Civilian or a Military VAO, or a voting assistance volunteer of a U.S. citizens organization overseas, you are critical to the success of these programs. You are responsible for providing accurate nonpartisan voting information and assistance.

The U.S. Uniformed Services have an extensive chain of command, which provides support for their VAOs. The Department of State offers voting assistance through its embassy and consulate VAOs to all U.S. citizens outside the United States. In addition, many U.S. citizen organizations and corporations outside the United States designate and support VAOs to assist their members, employees and other U.S. citizens living abroad.



#### A. Voting Assistance Officers - What are your responsibilities?

As a successful VAO, you engage in the following activities:

- Explore the FVAP website ([www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov)) and how the program can assist you.
- Become familiar with your organization or service voting websites.
- Review the FVAP biennial Voting Action Plan and use it as a timeline during the election year (found online at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov)).

- Become familiar with this *Guide*. (In addition to the FVAP website, this is your primary source of reference.)
- Learn the absentee voting process (see Chapter Two for more information).
- Attend a VAO training workshop. Workshops are offered in the Washington, D.C. area twice a month and at military installations and Department of State locations worldwide. Contact the FVAP or SVAOs for a schedule.

You may also complete E-Learning/Online Training. If unable to attend an in-person workshop, training may be completed online at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov) by downloading the workshop slides or requesting an e-learning training CD. Further instruction is provided on the FVAP website ([www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov)).

- Introduce yourself! Let people know you are available as a resource. Tell them how and where they can reach you.
- Keep current by signing up to receive press releases and the monthly *Voting Information News (VIN* - both are available online). The *VIN* will help you get started immediately with things "To Do This Month." Email [vote@fvap.ncr.gov](mailto:vote@fvap.ncr.gov) with your email address if you wish to receive it via email, or provide your full name and mailing address in the body of the email message to receive it by standard mail, or you can do both.
- Organize a local Voting Assistance Plan. (see Implementing an Effective Voting Assistance Plan in section II.A.)
- Review and/or create a "Continuity Folder." (see Continuity of Your Voting Assistance Program in section II.B.)

Specific responsibilities for carrying out a successful voting assistance program are found in sections I.B for civilian VAOs and in section I.C for military VAOs.

#### B. Civilian Voting Assistance Officers

Many U.S. citizen organizations and corporations outside the U.S. have designated a Voting Assistance Officer (VAO) for a two-year federal election cycle tenure. This VAO will serve as an organization's primary point of contact to work with the FVAP to carry out an effective voting assistance effort for the 2008-09 election years and establish continuity for future election years.

The FVAP provides the necessary materials for organizing and directing the organization's voting assistance program. Those materials include a 2008-09 Voting Action and Information Support Plan (outlining a schedule of action for

the election year), the FVAP voting news releases and the monthly newsletter, all the forms, advertising, and any other essential materials for an effective voting assistance program.

#### **Civilian VAO responsibilities include the following:**

- Expand citizen outreach within the local community to include direct contact with civic groups, American Chambers of Commerce, colleges and universities, and similar organizations.
- Serve as coordinator for FVAP on-site workshops.
- Plan and ensure that overseas U.S. citizens, including eligible family members, are informed of current registration and voting procedures and the importance of participating in the democratic process.
- Conduct non-partisan voter registration drives. **Overseas Citizens' Voters' Week, June 28-July 7, 2008**, is an excellent time to get the word out, as U.S. citizens gather for Independence Day activities.
- Ensure delivery of FPCAs to overseas U.S. citizens by August 15, 2007.
- Remind voters to include email address, phone and fax numbers on the FPCA so that it is easier for local election officials to contact them.
- Announce through various media during **Absentee Voting Week (October 12-18, 2008)** that voters should return their voted ballot immediately upon receiving it. If overseas voters have not received their requested regular state ballot by this week (or earlier based on location), they should use the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB).
- Submit an activity summary to the Director, the FVAP, by January 2009, on the voter outreach efforts conducted during the election year, including good ideas and lessons learned.

### **C. Military Voting Assistance Officers**

#### **Installation Voting Assistance Officer responsibilities**

Each Installation Commanding Officer (CO) has the overall responsibility for the operation of a successful voting assistance program within the command. The CO must appoint an officer to act as Installation Voting Assistance Officer (IVAO) to organize and direct the installation's voting assistance program. The command's IVAO will ensure that each subordinate unit and organization appoints, in writing, an officer, senior civilian employee or non-commissioned officer to organize and direct voting assistance activities within each unit or organization.

COs should conduct orientation briefings with unit VAOs prior to the start of primary elections. These briefings are intended to prepare unit VAOs for their duties and to ensure that voting assistance materials are on hand prior to the commencement of the 2008-09 command voting assistance program.

IVAO should act as a focal point on military installations in coordinating voting assistance support on their installation. IVAOs should maintain a roster of all unit VAOs on the installation (including tenant organizations), establish communications with these VAOs, and provide necessary materials and support.

If an FVAP workshop is scheduled for the installation, the CO should open the session. The IVAO will coordinate the workshop with all installation organizations as well as those surrounding installations. COs should make transportation available to take IVAOs and unit VAOs to the FVAP workshop held nearby.

In addition, the CO is required to plan and ensure that briefings of military personnel, their eligible family members, and civilian employees in overseas locations, and their eligible family members, are scheduled at the installation and/or unit level. The briefings should inform these individuals of current registration and voting procedures and the importance of voting.

The following officials are also involved in carrying out the voting assistance program:

- **Commanding Officer** — The CO must emphasize the voting program in staff meetings, other command meetings, briefings and daily communications with those on the installation. He or she must communicate support of the program and encourage staff participation and involvement throughout the command.
- **Legal Assistance Officer** — Legal questions which cannot be answered by the unit VAO should be referred to the command's legal staff.
- **Public Affairs/Information Officer** — This officer ensures that voting information is included in installation or unit publications such as newspapers, newsletters, daily bulletins, other printed media, where applicable, and Armed Forces Radio and Television Service. The Public Affairs Officer and the VAO should coordinate the activities for **Armed Forces Voters Week (August 31-September 7, 2008)** and **Absentee Voting Week (October 12-18, 2008)**.
- **Inspector General (IG)** — The IG, acting on behalf of the CO, has an interest in any program which concerns the rights of personnel and family members and helps to ensure that VAOs are trained and equipped to give assistance to citizens in the command. The IG is required by Federal law to

periodically review organization voting assistance programs to ensure compliance with DoD and Service directives and regulations.

- **Personnel/Human Resources Officer** — This officer ensures that all newly reporting personnel and naturalized U.S. citizens are provided FPCAs and VAO assistance in submitting change of address information to their local election office.
- **Chaplain** — As a respected member and leader in the military community, the chaplain can be of help in disseminating reminders and information to members of the community.
- **Publications, Supply, or Distribution Officer** — This officer ensures that installation and tenant unit VAOs receive copies of this *Guide*, Federal absentee voting forms, and other voting program informational materials. Sufficient amounts of these materials should be available for each member of the organization/unit, their voting-age dependents, and new personnel.
- **Officers-in-Charge** — VAOs should contact Officers in charge of exchanges, commissaries, special services activities, medical and dental facilities, education centers, family centers, etc. to coordinate the display of voting information materials and for participation in Armed Forces Voters Week activities (August 31-September 7, 2008) and Absentee Voters Week (October 12-18, 2008).

VAOs should remember to engage the many organizations and social networks that perform local service functions such as:

- **Spouses' Club** — This organization performs many service functions for the community and is always responsive to worthy community projects.
- **Boy/Girl Scouts, and Other Youth Groups** — These organizations carry out numerous citizenship-oriented service projects. Contact the installation officer who serves as the local scout leader.
- **Veterans and Service Organizations** — The Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, the Non-commissioned Officers Association and the League of Women Voters are typical of organizations that perform important community services and are eager to be of assistance. Contact local leaders.

### Unit Voting Assistance Officer responsibilities

Unit Voting Assistance Officers (VAO) have an opportunity to personalize a command's voting assistance efforts. Success of a voting assistance program in any election year may well depend upon the availability and quality of service that Unit VAOs provide their personnel and their family members.

The Unit VAO has the most contact with voters. Unit VAOs should do the following:

- Remind members of the unit to include an email address, phone and fax numbers on the FPCA so that it is easier for local election officials to contact the members.
- Post notices on bulletin boards and in high-traffic areas motivating people to register and vote.
- Plan and ensure that members of the unit, including eligible family members, are informed of current registration and voting procedures and the importance of participating in the democratic process.
- Conduct non-partisan voter registration drives. **Armed Forces Voters Week (August 31-September 7, 2008)** and **Absentee Voting Week (October 12-18, 2008)**, are excellent times to get the word out, as U.S. citizens gather for Independence Day activities.
- Ensure delivery of FPCAs to unit members by August 15, 2008.
- Announce through various media during **Absentee Voting Week (October 12-18, 2008)** that voters should return their voted ballot immediately upon receiving it. If unit members have not received their requested regular state ballot by this week (or earlier based on location), they should use the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB).
- Ensure there is an adequate supply of voting materials on hand for year-round registration, absentee ballot requests, and change of address requests for members moving or changing assignment location.
- Remind members in the organization that have received the FVAP Post Election Survey to complete it and return it immediately.

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## II. Your Voting Assistance Plan

### A. Implementing an Effective Voting Assistance Plan

As the Military and Embassy/Consulate Voting Assistance Officer (VAO), you have the important responsibility of providing accurate, nonpartisan voting information and assistance to the individual who wants to register and vote. By creating and following a voting action plan, you can be more effective.

#### Tips for developing an effective Voting Assistance Plan:

- Visit the FVAP's website at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov).
- Help U.S. citizens to register and request a ballot.
- Encourage them to learn about the candidates and the issues and to vote.
- Distribute all voting materials and information in a timely manner.

- Be sure your installation directory has your contact information for referrals.
- Keep your voting continuity folder (see section II.B) up-to-date by putting all localized events and activities and public affairs notices in the folder. This will ensure your successor receives a quick orientation of his or her voting responsibilities upon your departure.
- Make certain you have an adequate supply of forms for each person for whom you are responsible. This includes a sufficient supply to cover eligible family members, changes of address, deployments, and new arrivals to your section of responsibility.
- Hold a voting information briefing or voter registration drive for the citizens you are responsible for assisting.
- Display the 2008 Election Dates and motivational posters. Include your contact information at the bottom of the poster.



- Ensure that you are on the distribution list for the FVAP *News Release* and the *Voting Information News* newsletter and distribute this information widely. Copy and post information from the *newsletter* and make it available to your local media for coverage. FVAP highly encourages the duplication and redistribution of these publications. The *VIN* is available by email, mail, and online. News Releases are available by email and online at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov). Get added to the distribution list by sending an email with “subscribe” in the subject line to [vote@fvap.ncr.gov](mailto:vote@fvap.ncr.gov).
- Make an extra effort to contact younger citizens (18 - 24 year age- group). This group has statistically shown lower voter participation. Don't forget shift workers. If you are an overseas VAO, include American organizations, associations and corporations in your absentee voting activities. If you are a military VAO, include tenant organizations, especially National Guard and Reserve units. Also, remember to include clubs and organizations to which family members may belong.

- Duplicate and circulate copies of the “Frequently Asked Questions for Uniformed Service Members” (Appendix C) and “Frequently Asked Questions for Overseas Citizens,” (Appendix D). Both are also available on the FVAP website.
- Utilize the motivational “Get Out The Vote” Public Service Announcements in print, audio, and video format in local media. Contact FVAP for copies.
- Contact the FVAP if you cannot find answers locally or through your Service Voting Action Officer.
- Attend a local FVAP workshop and utilize the online training (slide presentation) at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov).
- Send your good ideas and lessons learned to your Department of State or Service Voting Action Officer. Contact information is available on the inside front cover of this *Guide*.
- Complete and submit the survey from the FVAP after the 2008 election as soon as possible. If you did not receive one, you may submit your own feedback by contacting the FVAP staff anytime.

## B. Continuity of Your Organizations Voting Assistance Program

### The Continuity Folder

Often members of the Uniformed Services and employees of Federal agencies, Embassies/Consulates, and international organizations and corporations, move in and out of VAO assignments in the normal course of their job rotations. VAOs taking on the voting program for the first time enter their VAO job with little understanding of what they are required to do. For this reason, the FVAP stresses the importance of creating and maintaining a voting continuity folder for both your reference and for passing on to successors.

Your continuity folder should provide basic details on absentee voting procedures and contain anything that may help your backup or successor perform successfully. The continuity folder should also provide the VAO with a quick orientation of his or her voting responsibilities within an organization and Service. It should indicate the duties that will meet the organization's absentee voting needs.

Your voting continuity files can be in the form of a physical notebook, file folders, or even an online community folder (electronic version). It is important that the folder, in whatever format, be made readily available to potential VAOs and assistants. The Service websites are a great resource when updating or constructing your continuity folder/files.

### What should your Continuity Folder Contain?

- List of persons who will be assisting you.

- Contact information of your backup or possible successor who will continue the program when you are not available.
- Absentee voting forms: the Federal Post Card Application, Standard Form 76 (FPCA, SF 76); the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot, Standard Form 186 (FWAB SF 186); copies of the online FPCA and FWAB
- Current *Voting Assistance Guide*



- Recent *Voting Information News* and Voting News Releases
- VAO Designation Letter
- Election Dates Calendar
- Service or Organization Reporting Requirement Materials
- Current State Department or Service guidance (directive, instruction, order, etc.).
- Voting Action Plan (as applicable)
- DoD Directives such as 1000.4. (Federal Voting Assistance Program) and 1344.10 (Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces in Active Duty). Copy of the Hatch Act, Title 5 U.S.C. Sec. 7321 (for Federal Employees overseas)
- Voting assistance election website links
- VAO local phone and email contact list to include contact information for VAOs in other units, services, organizations and installations near you for future voting assistance activities
- VAOs located stateside: Local county election official contact information to refer local military members for assistance
- Training materials from workshops
- Clippings of local media coverage of your program or election news.

- Voting assistance good ideas and lessons learned
- Recent email messages from Service Voting Action Officer (SVAO), installation VAO (IVAO) or the FVAP
- Information and motivational handouts (available at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov))
- Miscellaneous emails addressing problem solving and other issues of concern

Many of these materials are available through your normal service supply chain, the Installation Voting Assistance Officer, Service Voting Action Officer or the FVAP. You may also download voting assistance materials from the FVAP website at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov) under "Voting Assistance Tools."

### C. Do you have a Good Idea or Lesson Learned?

The FVAP supports and encourages developing, collecting, sharing and implementing good ideas and lessons learned regarding the absentee voting process, this *Guide*, and other FVAP voting materials. The objectives are to:

- Enhance lines of communication among VAOs at all levels
- Facilitate global sharing of good ideas and lessons learned from successes and mistakes
- Enable local organizational voting assistance programs to tailor and implement the good ideas and lessons learned.

An Absentee Voting Good Idea is an idea that has proven to be helpful to the citizens you are responsible for providing assistance, and helpful to you in the performance of your duties. Good Ideas are also processes and procedures that have produced excellent results within an organization and have contributed significantly to the mission of your Voting Assistance Program.

Send your good ideas and lessons learned to your State Department or Service Voting Action Officer (contact information on the inside cover) using the guidelines provided below.

Overseas citizen organization VAOs and individuals may submit their good ideas directly to the FVAP via email, [vote@fvap.ncr.gov](mailto:vote@fvap.ncr.gov). The good ideas from each of the Services are displayed on the FVAP website at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov). Good ideas and lessons learned are also disseminated through the *Voting Information News*.

After each Federal election year, the Services submit an after-action report that includes their good ideas. FVAP encourages VAOs to replicate these practices in their voting plan for implementing during the election year.

### Guidance for Submitting Good Ideas and Lessons Learned

VAO sources of information used to generate good ideas and lessons learned may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Personal experiences as a VAO
- Assessments, audits, and appraisals
- Training evaluations
- Operational Readiness Reviews
- Critiques, analyses, and investigations
- Process improvement initiatives
- VAO training
- Voting activities such as registration drives

A good idea or lessons learned should contain four basic elements:

- A clear statement of the idea or lesson
- A background summary of how the idea was developed or the lesson was learned
- Benefits of using the idea or lesson (improvements, accomplishments, etc.) and suggestion how the idea or lesson may be used or adapted in the future
- Your contact information

### D. Post Election Survey

The FVAP conducts periodic surveys of voting assistance personnel and is required by law to submit a report to the President and Congress. The surveys are designed to measure the effectiveness of the Voting Assistance Program and the availability and use of informational support materials at any given time during the election year. Voting assistance personnel are encouraged to discuss any aspect of the program with the FVAP at any time.



## III. Voting Assistance Officers and Voters

### A. Restrictions on Distributing Partisan Information

As the VAO, you may provide only non-partisan voting procedures and information. You are not to distribute any literature from candidates, political parties, or partisan organizations. Organizations become partisan when they endorse or imply endorsement of candidates or identify with issues in a campaign. Military VAOs should contact the FVAP and also obtain the Commanding Officer's approval before distributing literature from any outside organization.

The Department of Defense's policy regarding the maintenance of political neutrality is stated in DoD Directive 5410.18:

*"The Armed Forces and the Defense Establishment belong to all the American people... Department of Defense support of and participation in events and activities in the civilian domain will reflect that fact... [and such] support and participation must not directly or indirectly (a) endorse or selectively benefit or favor, or appear to endorse or selectively benefit or favor any private individual, group, corporation (whether profit or nonprofit), religion, sect or sectarian group, quasi-religious or ideological movement, fraternal organization, political organization, or commercial venture, or (b) be associated with the solicitation of votes in a political election."*

Military VAOs also should refer to DoD Directive 1344.10 "Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces on Active Duty." Links to these directives are available online at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov). VAOs should report any irregularities in the voting process to their department or agency headquarters VAO.

Federally employed VAOs should refer to the Hatch Act, Title 5 U.S.C. Sec. 7321 (link available at [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov)).

### B. Providing Information on Candidates

It is your responsibility to inform citizens about the procedures to follow in order to register and vote. It is the citizens' responsibility to obtain information about candidates and issues. However, you can give advice on locating information.

You may refer citizens to the following general sources to obtain information:

- The World Wide Web
- National and hometown newspapers
- Magazines

- Radio
- Television
- Information obtained directly from the political party and campaign committee offices supporting a particular political candidate or proposal.
- English language newspapers and periodicals published overseas may also include information about candidates and issues.
- State Election Sites (links available from the FVAP website) also provide information on candidates.

Other sources of information about elections and candidates for members of the military and their family members include Armed Forces Radio and Television Service

(AFRTS), *Stars and Stripes*, the American Forces Information Service (AFIS), as well as newspaper articles and features distributed for military editors and used by the American Forces Press and Publications Service (AFPPS).

The two major political parties in the United States (Democratic and Republican) have organized groups in many countries throughout the world. Further information concerning overseas political activities by either party may be obtained by contacting their umbrella organizations Democrats Abroad and Republicans Abroad International.

These and other groups of U.S. citizens provide non-partisan assistance for registration and voting.

