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A MOVE to Allow Military Personnel Enough Time to Vote

By Susan Bysiewicz

President Obama's recent decision to commit another 30,000 U.S. troops to the fight against Islamist extremism in Afghanistan is another sober reminder of the fact that the brave men and women of our armed forces carry a heavy burden of sacrifice so the rest of us can live in a free society.

As I recently told more than 700 Connecticut National Guard troops as they were sent off to combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, they are the defenders of our right as Americans to vote and choose our leaders.

Until now, however, too many members of our military were unable to exercise that right themselves as they serve our country overseas.

It can take weeks for any mail to get through to our ground troops serving in forward bases from Khandahar to Kirkuk or on submarines and aircraft carriers that can be at sea for 60 days or more. Delays in the existing mail system simply have not left military men and women serving far away from home enough time to cast absentee ballots to be counted for our elections. Connecticut is, unfortunately, no exception.

Normally, any registered voter in Connecticut who is not able to be at their polling place on Election Day can apply for an absentee ballot in person at their town clerk's office or through the mail; and the ballot is sent and received in a matter of days. A 2008 study, however, conducted by the Pew Center on the States looked at 34 states and found that Connecticut was one of a few states where this process on average took 57 days to complete for military voters overseas. In many cases, the ballots could not even be returned by the troops until after the election and their votes were not counted. This travesty is simply unacceptable.

A new law recently signed by President Obama and enacted with the key help of Senator Chris Dodd and Congressman Joe Courtney aims to rectify that situation nationwide. The Military Overseas Voter Empowerment Act, or the MOVE act, will dramatically cut the time for processing and sending absentee ballot materials. Among other things, the MOVE Act requires local election officials to make the forms and ballots available electronically – through fax, email, or web downloads.

Soldiers, sailors and airmen may not have regular access to “snail mail,” but even in remote locations or at sea there can be access to fax machines or internet stations where absentee ballot materials can be printed.

In Connecticut, the MOVE Act is expected to take nearly a month off the processing time for absentee ballot materials and actually give our military men and women enough time to have a say in our elections.

The MOVE Act requires me, as Connecticut’s Chief Election Official, to work with local officials to develop a free access system that allows military and overseas voters to determine whether their absentee ballot was received by the appropriate election official. The Connecticut Town Clerks Association is fully on board with this new effort and we will be working together in the coming weeks and months to make sure a reliable system of transferring absentee ballot materials to military and overseas voters is in place.

Town clerks are now also required to send absentee ballots at least 45 days before the election to any military or overseas voter who has submitted a request by that date. For 2010, this means that absentee ballots for military and overseas voters must be sent by September 18th, which is 45 days before the General Election on November 2nd.

Some may say that these changes should have been made a long time ago. I agree. This is a change I and many of my fellow Secretaries of State have sought at the federal level for years, and is similar to a bill I proposed in the Connecticut General Assembly this past legislative session.

I also recognize, however, that we must step gingerly when allowing the electronic transfer of ballot materials to any voters, so as not to compromise the integrity and security of our elections. Still, the MOVE Act is a giant step forward that will guarantee that our brave military men and women serving their country overseas will have the opportunity to use the right they are putting their lives on the line to defend. I look forward to implementing it in 2010.

Susan Bysiewicz is Connecticut’s Secretary of the State