

Military OneSource Podcast — Ballots Beyond Borders: Military Spouses and Absentee Voting

Federal Voting Assistance Program

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military One Source podcast. Military One Source is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. There's an election coming up. You may have seen some headlines about it. Well, we're doing, a series of podcast episodes on the topic of how you can vote, specifically how service members and their families can vote. Oftentimes, this involves an absentee ballot, so we're going to spend some time, we're going to talk about that. How to get one, where to send it, when. All those questions, we're going to take care of you so that you can vote in the election with confidence. Now for today's episode, we're going to focus on military spouses, and we have two guests to get us through this conversation. Our guests are Kehinde Oshikoyapamphille, and Kehinde is the manager of the Air Force and Space Force Voting Programs. Also joining us today is Khiet Ho, and Khiet is lead researcher with an organization called the Secure Families Initiative. I'd like to say welcome to the both of you.

Khiet Ho:

Good morning. Good evening for you.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, you know what? Let me just say, I'm so glad to have both of you with us. Khiet is actually joining us from Korea. Am I correct?

Khiet Ho:

Correct, in South Korea.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, so it's like 6 a.m. in the morning.

Khiet Ho:

Correct.

Bruce Moody:

The other question I have for the both of you, did I pronounce your names correctly?

Khiet Ho:

You sure did. Bruce, thank you so much.

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphille:

Yes, you did. You nailed it.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, good, good. You know what, it's important. Your names are sacred. They are truly ours, and we should respect each other's names and pronounce them correctly. There we go. Let's just jump into the conversation. I want to begin by talking about the Federal Voting Assistance Program. For those who have not heard of this, this is actually something that belongs to the Department of Defense, but maybe Kehinde, you can start us off and explain what this program is.

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphille:

Absolutely, I can. Thank you very much, Bruce. The Federal Voting Assistance Program, which we refer to as FVAP, actually stems from UOCAVA, and that means the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act. That act actually protects the right to vote for every service member, their spouses, as well as their dependents, their family members in the United States and those that reside outside of the United States as well. It also actually requires each of the government department to distribute balloting materials. Those balloting materials actually used to develop a program of information and services as well as education for all employees and family members covered under UOCAVA.

Bruce Moody:

Right, to include service members and their families.

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphille:

Yeah.

Bruce Moody:

Which brings you into the picture. How does this work? So, You're with the Air Force and the Space Force, but your efforts fall under the Federal Voting Assistance Program?

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphille:

Right. My role within the Air Force and the Space Force, and we typically call that the Department of Air Force. I manage the Voting Assistance Program, and I fall under the Federal Voting Assistance Program. The Federal Voting Assistance Program is actually

the umbrella that we fall under, and they have total oversight of all services, so Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and the Coast Guard, as well as the Department of State.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. Now, Khiet, as we said, you're with the Secure Families Initiative. What does this organization do?

Khiet Ho:

The Secure Families Initiative is a military advocacy organization. We have three main issues. One of the pillars we have is to expand the military vote and to defend democracy. Our second pillar is decisions over war and peace. We gather and advocate around military voices to contribute our perspective when there are decisions being made about how the military is employed or deployed for specific issues. Our third pillar is to demilitarize domestic forces as well. Our goal is to have representation of diverse military voices and not just a singular perspective.

Bruce Moody:

Right. Now, Khiet, when we talk about military personnel, their families and voting, what are some of the challenges that you see?

Khiet Ho:

Yes, thank you for that question. One of the wonderful things about UOCAVA, the law that protects the military vote, especially when overseas, is that it also mandates the Department of Defense to provide voting assistance officers for every single military unit. The main issue for military dependents, just like many other issues for military dependents, is although resources might be available such as FVAP, oftentimes the information doesn't quite trickle down all the way to every single military dependent. Although the resources are out there, there's still a lot of work that is required of military family members to understand that FVAP exists, that voting assistance officers exist, that we have resources out there that we can reach out to.

Because of that, we've been trying really hard to get the word out that Military One Source is a resource to reach out to FVAP. The website is a resource to reach out to. Alongside the fact that Secure Families Initiative also has a voting ambassador program, so we are trying to empower military-connected individuals to become a resource for one another. There are voting ambassadors that are sprinkled throughout the world, including in Europe, including in Australia, including in Asia, as well as throughout different locations in the United States as well. We are another avenue that you can reach out to, and we will help with the voter registration process and to answer questions about what it is you have to do to vote as a military member or a military family member.

Bruce Moody:

When it comes to voting, most of the time, I think something in the neighborhood of three-quarters of all military personnel and their family members are using an absentee ballot.

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphile:

Correct.

Bruce Moody:

Kehinde, let's talk about how military spouses, how their families can learn about absentee ballot. I think what's really, really important here, I don't mean to jump ahead of you, but is that even though we're having a podcast, and yes, we're from the Pentagon, a lot of these resources are on an installation. They're local to wherever you are. Can you jump in and talk about that please?

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphile:

Absolutely. But the Department of Air Force, we actually have two IVAOs. They're installation voting assistance officers that are located at Military and Family Readiness Centers. Also, we have unit voting assistance officers that are actually strategically placed within their unit. There are also appointed voting assistance officers that are assigned to a unit or squadron on the installation. We have those two combined avenues for spouses to reach out to, to get voting information.

Another thing I wanted to foot stomp is when we talk predominantly about spouses, we welcome them at the center because we offer so many classes and workshops, events and activities, from how to acclimate as a newcomer to the country or the new state they're in, to events like Heart Link, Heart Support. Heart Link is where we educate spouses about everything, about, well not everything, but most pertinent things that the spouse should know, to employment assistance, financial readiness assistance, and so on. We encourage spouses to attend the classes, to come into the center, and there they definitely will meet an IVAO that will offer voting services to them.

Another avenue also could be that they receive emails directly from the IVAOs, the installation voting Assistance officers that are at the Military and Family Readiness Centers. They find avenues to maximize how information is disseminated on the installation through the spouse's sponsors or their spouses, their active-duty spouses, who in turn take that information home. Again, to foot stomp, we also have what we call a Commander Key Spouse Support Liaison program. There, the key spouses get information directly from an appointed key spouse support liaison, who highly likely has the spouse's email address and phone number also to be able to facilitate or provide information about voting.

Essentially, IVAOs are located at Military and Family Readiness Centers across Air Force installations and joint bases as well. They are, voting assistance officers are postured, they're ready there to provide information and resources to our spouses. Of course,

they can also access the Military and Family Readiness Center via Facebook. Our Facebook also highlights our program needs. We also have websites for the Military and Family Readiness Center that also list the Voting Assistance Office. By law, we're required to list the Voter Assistance Office on our websites as well worldwide.

Bruce Moody:

That source of getting your questions answered is very, very local. It almost is to the point where, if you're talking to your Family Readiness Center or your command, there's almost no wrong door. You just have to really speak up and ask questions. But Kehinde, so that people know the kind of questions that they should be asking, maybe you can explain the process of absentee voting for military spouses. What are the steps that they need to take?

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphille:

Right. One of the main things that I want to foot stomp is the Military Spouse Residency Relief Act. This act allows service members to establish as a spouse, if they have a physical address, it allows them to retain their residency with the service member, or the spouse can elect to retain their own residency if they choose not to utilize their sponsor or their spouse's residency. That Relief Act has been put in place to definitely ensure that they have choices.

Now, they cannot just decide to say, "Oh, I just want to pick another state," just because. There has to be some proof or a proof that they were a resident of that state. Ways to establish that might, of course, it's through voting. If you voted previously and you want to continue to vote there, even though you're in a new location, you can do that. Another avenue is by paying taxes, by filing your taxes, owning property, your driver's license or registering your vehicle. So lots and lots of avenues. Of course, I do want to emphasize FVAP.gov. Their website provides everything a spouse needs to know and how to fill out the absentee ballot. Spouses should just make sure that they update their address every time they move, every time they move.

Khiet Ho:

Could I jump in here?

Bruce Moody:

Please do.

Khiet Ho:

Yeah. As a military spouse to an active-duty Marine of 17 years now, we have moved probably 6, 7, 8 times now. I really have lost track. As a military spouse who cares a lot about exercising my right to vote, I have registered and re-registered to vote every single place that we've been located because I do not take my service member's home of record. Instead, every single time we've moved, I have registered to vote in California, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arizona, Virginia. I have also voted while overseas while

living in Japan, and currently now we are in South Korea, so I am registered to vote while living overseas a second time.

Although the voting assistance officers exist out there, I will say that many military spouses, including people who've been in for over a decade, have had very little contact with the voting assistance officers, unless the voting assistance officers have been very active in reaching out to military families. I think oftentimes there might be notices in various emails that might get lost, and there might be military spouses who try to seek out who their installation voting assistance officers are, but for lots of reasons, and as a military spouse, we've all experienced calling up medical or calling up other places and the phone number doesn't go through or we have to figure out where that office is.

What I will say, what's wonderful about FVAP is that you can do it from anywhere. You can do it on your phone, you can do it on your computer. You can Google search how to register to vote as a military spouse. I'm located here, I am registered in this particular state. No matter what, every single Board of Elections website that I have been to, when you search out as a military voter, it will kick you back to the FVAP website so that you can fill out the federal postcard application, which is the main document for one to register to vote absentee as a military voter.

Just like what you said before, Bruce, there's no wrong door in order for you to vote as a military voter. You just have to reach out. You have to seek out the voting assistance officer. You can ask your service member, who should have contact with the voting assistance officer. You can seek out the installation voting assistance officer. You can do your own Google searches for how to vote as a military voter. Every single state and county's Board of Elections will kick you back to the FVAP website. There's also the voting ambassadors through SFI, and we are also here as a resource. We are here as enthusiastic individuals to ensure that you can vote if you want to vote as a legal voter.

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphile:

That is excellent, actually, that you said that. I myself, I was a military spouse for 24 years until he retired. Yes, I also can definitely chime into the fact that everywhere I went, I did vote. Very lucky also that the Air Force takes our Federal Voting Assistance Program seriously, and we maximize avenues to reach out to our spouses and to also bring them into the Military and Family Readiness Center where we have so much information and resources and people to literally work them hand in hand to make sure that they get that ballot, their forms filled out and mailed out, and just provide that added continuity and support.

Khiet Ho:

I think that's such an important point, Kehinde, which is that I think a lot of voters might be intimidated about the process of how do you register and how do you vote. But there are people, literally people at these offices who are so enthusiastic and will help you along every step of the way. I don't think any military voter should feel embarrassed or nervous about getting your questions answered. There have been lots of stumbling blocks that people have encountered, including somebody here who tried to register to

vote, but their Adobe wouldn't load, their PDF wouldn't load, so they couldn't print it out. They wanted to do it but couldn't do it. There are people out here who have helped her along the way to ensure that she can indeed register, and she can indeed vote when the time comes.

Bruce Moody:

This really reminds me, it wasn't actually until after I retired from being in the military that I started going to my local voting precinct. What I found was pretty much the same thing. Whether you're voting at the local elementary school which is a couple of blocks from your home, or whether you're stationed overseas and you're dealing with a voting assistance officer, there is a level of enthusiasm. This is a job that people take seriously. They enjoy it. They enjoy the reaching out to people, the getting information out. They enjoy helping people exercise their right to vote. They love it. If you want to make somebody's day, you go to them with questions.

Khiet Ho:

Absolutely.

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphille:

Absolutely, yes, yes.

Bruce Moody:

We're going to put a bunch of phone numbers and links, especially to the Federal Voting Assistance Program. We're going to put them in the program notes. Maybe what we can just do is just wrap up with any final thoughts on this conversation. Kehinde, let's just begin with you.

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphille:

Absolutely. My thought as a spouse and as a program manager as well for the voting program is, as spouses, we get very, very excited when we have to move. Right? It's like going on vacation. We're also often worried about, okay, what schools are the kids going to go to? What school am I going to continue my education with? Where am I going to live? What's it going to be like? And so on. We tend to really forget about voting for a moment until it gets too close to when we want to vote. What I encourage our spouses to do is to reach out, like you said, to all those resources, information, the folks that will be there to help them through any challenges, any hurdles, any questions, any queries, any concerns that they may have about voting. We always foot stomp within the Air Force what the Federal Voting Assistance Program foot stomps is, that Americans, each and every one of us can vote wherever we want, anywhere in the world.

Bruce Moody:

There we go. Khiet, you get the last word.

Khiet Ho:

The main takeaway that I want listeners to understand, especially if you are an overseas voter, is that it is very important to complete the process as early as possible so you can track and troubleshoot if any issues come up. Sometimes you're missing a little bit of information about your address, or maybe there's a bit of your signature that could use some correction. If you start the process early enough and you're tracking the process that you can reach out to your local Board of Elections and ask, "Hey, I sent in the federal postcard application. I don't see that I'm fully registered to vote yet. Are there any issues there?" Then you can correct that application to ensure that you can receive your absentee ballot.

As an overseas voter, the law states that you are to receive your absentee ballot 45 days before the election. Again, it's important for you to vote as soon as possible so that you can track your ballot actually being received by that voting office, and for you to troubleshoot any issues that might come up. Again, there could be issues that say that the bubble that you filled in might not have been fully bubbled in, or there's some other issue and you want to have enough time so that your vote actually counts.

I will say to reiterate, my main messages are to start the registration process early, track your ballot to make sure it gets counted and again, reach out to any resource that you know that is available to you, whether it is your voting assistance officer, your local Facebook group, the Secure Families Initiative voting ambassadors that are out there. You can email us at info@securefamiliesinitiative.org, and we are human beings behind the scenes who will reach out to you and make sure that you can vote. We care so much about making sure that you can participate in the civic process.

Bruce Moody:

There we go. Human beings excited and passionate about this topic, and we so appreciate you being with us. Khiet Ho and Kehinde Oshikoyapamphille, thank you to the both of you. We really appreciate you being on the podcast.

Khiet Ho:

Thank you so much, Bruce.

Kehinde Oshikoyapamphille:

Thank you very much, and you guys have a great day. Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

We will, yes. Want to remind everybody that Military One Source is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. If you have any questions about what you heard today or maybe a comment, use the link in the program notes and we'd love to hear from you. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, because we cover a wide variety of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening. Take care. Bye-Bye.