

## Military OneSource Podcast — From Registration to Results: Get to Know Your Election Officials

### Federal Voting Assistance Program

#### Episode transcript

##### Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource 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](http://militaryonesource.mil).

##### Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. So we have an election coming up. I don't want to talk too much about it, but I do want to talk about your right to vote as a service member, as a military family. So I'm a retired Navy chief, and the way I voted and where I voted was different every time for 20 years. That was my normal, and I know it is for a lot of you. So we have with us today two amazing guests. Brianna Lennon joins us from Missouri. And Hilary Rudy is in Colorado. They're both election officials. We're so glad to have you with us. Welcome to the podcast.

##### Brianna Lennon:

Yeah, thanks for having me.

##### Hilary Rudy:

Thanks.

##### Bruce Moody:

So before we begin, let me say to our listeners that if you have any questions about what you hear today, any comments that you want to make, let us know. There's a link in the program notes for that, and you can always call Military OneSource the call center, and that number is also in the program notes. I also want to say that it's really important to note that for military families, your command and your installation has a voting assistance program, has people in place to help you. So whether you start with your supervisor or you go to the family assistance center, there's no wrong door. There will be somebody to help you there who can help you vote. But, and this is why we're having this conversation, because there are areas where your state and local election officials can help or guide. And that's the conversation that we're going to be having today. So Brianna, let's start with you, with just an overview of what state election

officials, local election officials, what is the role in the voting process as it applies to service members and their families?

**Brianna Lennon:**

Yeah, so the biggest thing, and I'll speak mostly from the local election side of things, for those of us that are local and run elections, it's our responsibility to not only get people registered to vote, but also get them their ballot and help them make sure that they are able to exercise their right to vote. So we do a lot of voter education with our overseas and military voters to make sure that they are filling out Federal Postcard Applications. Because filling out a Federal Postcard Application in Missouri especially allows you to both register to vote and request your ballot for a long period of time. So one Federal Postcard Application lasts you for over a year. And if you fill it out in the beginning of the year, it'll automatically make you eligible for all of the ballots for all of the elections for the rest of the year.

So we do a lot of communication with our voters to make sure that they are aware of when their request expires so that they can submit a new one, and then they're also eligible in Missouri for us to be able to transmit these ballots electronically. And I know that's true pretty universally across the country. So one of the biggest things that we do as we are getting closer to the election 46 days out is email out ballots to our military and overseas voters. So if you are a military voter, you have that ability to receive your ballot in your email, and then fill it out, print it out and mail it back to our office. So that's the biggest role that we play, is really in the exercising of their right to vote.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, I'm not sure if 46 is the day we're recording or the day this is going to post, but either way it's really soon. As we go back and forth on this Hilary, Brianna, just feel free to jump in and add to others, add to some of the thoughts that have already been provided. So we'll just kind of go back and forth, but feel free to jump in any time. Hilary, what sort of help do you provide to military families who need to vote when they're stationed away from home?

**Hilary Rudy:**

Sure. So our role at the state is really to support our local election officials in making sure that our military voters have that opportunity to vote. So as we head into the election, we are providing support to the county election officials. We're also providing support to our voters who are giving us a call with questions, how to get their ballot, that type of thing. And then we also make sure that our ballot delivery system for electronic ballot delivery is up and running and ready to go by the 46th day, as well as our receipt portal. So different states have different rules around how military and overseas voters can return their ballots. And so we want to make sure that following Colorado's laws, we offer all of those opportunities as well.

**Brianna Lennon:**

I mean, they're our first absentee ballots to go out and like you said, I'm not sure when this is airing either, but they've already gone out. Sept. 20 was when we emailed out over 200 ballots got emailed or electronically delivered using our statewide system as well. And by the next day we already had some military and overseas voters that had returned their ballot. So right now, people are casting their ballot that are military and overseas. And it's really important, I know that we're probably going to touch on this later, but it's really important to kind of build that relationship with your local election authority. One of the things that we try to do is maintain consistent contact with folks so that if they do have a question, they're talking to the same person in the office.

And over the years, we get to know people pretty well, so they know when they have to fill out their new form and things like that so that they can get their ballot. But emailing the ballot 46 days beforehand really gives everyone an opportunity to take their time and research, but then also gives them enough time to mail their ballot back. Because most of the military and overseas voters are going to have to print out their ballot and send it back to us through the mail. And if they are far overseas or in a remote area, it's important that they have as much time as possible to get it in the mail. So that's one of the reasons that they go out so early.

**Bruce Moody:**

Right. So what kind of materials are included when you send out the ballots?

**Hilary Rudy:**

I'll jump in, Brianna, and speak to Colorado's process a little bit. So we send the ballot out to voters the way that they request it. So they can request it by mail or electronically. But certainly, as Brianna mentioned, the electronic delivery gives our voters so much more time. So our ballots went in the mail as well by the 46th day, by Sept. 20. And in our ballot packets, we include information about how to return it. So under Colorado law, our voters can return their ballot if they're military overseas by email or fax or mail at their preference. And so we include information on how to do any of those three options as well as information about our deadlines and how to get those ballots back to us on time so that they can be counted.

**Bruce Moody:**

So how do absentee voters send in their ballots? What are the options?

**Brianna Lennon:**

So it's very dependent on what state they are in. Everybody has a little bit of a different way. I can guarantee you that everybody has the ability to mail their ballot back. And I think there are some states that allow for electronic transfer. We do allow for electronic transfer. If somebody needs to email their ballot back because they're in an area in Missouri, our requirement is that it's designated as a hostile fire zone. So the Secretary of State's office has a list that they get in part from the DOD and the IRS as designated hostile fire zones. Those voters in those areas can email back or electronically transmit

their ballots, but everyone else needs to mail their ballot back along with an accompanying affidavit.

**Bruce Moody:**

Interesting. So for deployed people, that very much relates to their experiences and some of the things they need to consider. What should absentee voters do if they haven't received their ballots yet?

**Hilary Rudy:**

They should absolutely contact their state or local election officials.

**Brianna Lennon:**

Yeah, absolutely. Reaching out to us is the number one thing that you can do because it may be a situation where we haven't received your application. One of the tricky things about using email is that sometimes attachments can get stripped from things if it hits as a security issue. There might be difficulties accessing particular websites and things like that. So it's really imperative, going back to building that relationship, knowing who your local election authority is, is really invaluable. So that way if you build that rapport and you have been voting with the same place for quite some time, or you're going to be overseas for a long period of time, that way they can help reach out. If they expect to see your request and they haven't seen your request yet, they're going to reach out to you. And vice versa. If you haven't seen a ballot yet, absolutely reach out to your local election authority and ask why you haven't seen it yet.

**Bruce Moody:**

If you haven't seen it yet, is it an option to use a federal write-in absentee ballot?

**Hilary Rudy:**

The federal write-in absentee ballot really is a last-chance ballot that allows you to cast your ballot in your jurisdiction. It's available in every single jurisdiction, and if you don't receive your regular ballot or don't believe it's going to get to your local election official on time, you can cast a federal write-in absentee ballot, where you can at least vote for the parties of your choice. Or if you know the candidates, you can write in the candidates. And the rules for processing those vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. But at least in Colorado, our preference really is to get that absentee ballot back from you. So we're really going to try hard to make sure we can get your full ballot back. But that federal write-in absentee ballot is a safeguard to make sure that you're able to cast your vote if we aren't able to get that regular absentee.

**Bruce Moody:**

You know, a slightly different question here. So how do election officials count ballots? In other words, how do they make sure that each ballot is counted only once?

**Brianna Lennon:**

So I think that's a great question, especially for military and overseas voters. Because if we're emailing you your ballot, you're obviously not sending us back a traditional ballot that we could then run through our tabulator like we would do for somebody that comes to vote in person or even by mail domestically. So one of the things that happens to a military ballot is a recreation process. We have a bipartisan team of election judges that come into the office to process our military and overseas ballots.

And what they do is first they remove the ballot from the affidavit so that it is anonymous and that you maintain your privacy, but then the ballot itself is recreated by that bipartisan team. One of them will say the selection on that ballot, and the other one will mark the selection on the full ballot to make sure that that ballot can be read through the machine, and then the ballot that was mailed back to us or emailed back to us, that is not going to be counted because at that point, it has already been recreated, that is marked as a duplicate ballot. And then the actual ballots that the bipartisan team has marked is run through the machine.

So there's a chain of custody in place for every military and overseas ballot that comes through so that we know if it's been recreated and when it's been counted, so that we can track it all throughout the process. And then once it's counted, we mark off on the voter's record that their ballot has been counted. And that's how a voter can confirm, if they call our office, that their ballot has been counted. Or if it came back and unfortunately was really late, sometimes we do get ballots three and four weeks after the election, and that is too late for us to be able to count them. Then the ballot is marked rejected and the voter's record is updated with that as well. So every ballot is accounted for and every voter record is tied back to that ballot. Not how you voted, but that you voted.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, important distinction. You mentioned ballots coming in late. Are there special provisions in place for late ballots?

**Hilary Rudy:**

Well, I think the rules around deadlines for ballot receipt are going to vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. But speaking to Colorado's process, we have provisions in place for ballots to come in after election day, in Colorado it's up to eight days, and that's the same for military and overseas voters. But we also allow for electronic return in Colorado. So again, those rules are varying from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. So it's important that voters are talking with their local election officials so that they know what options are available to them and returning that ballot as early as possible to make sure that they have it counted.

**Bruce Moody:**

Can voters track their ballot status?

Hilary Rudy:

Absolutely. In Colorado, there's a couple of ways to do that. We offer ballot tracks, which you can sign up for to get text or email updates about the status of your ballot all the way from when your local election official mails it or sends it to you until you have it received in the county and counted. You can also go to our online voter registration portal and look there, at [govotecolorado.gov](http://govotecolorado.gov).

**Brianna Lennon:**

Because, womp womp, we're not as cool as Colorado. In Missouri, you cannot track your ballot.

**Bruce Moody:**

No.

**Brianna Lennon:**

So in Missouri, you cannot track your ballot. We don't have a way to do that right now at the statewide level. What you can do is call your local election official and ask if it's been returned. But we don't yet have ballot tracking.

**Bruce Moody:**

So it really varies state to state is what you're saying?

**Brianna Lennon:**

Yes, yeah, absolutely. Colorado is the gold standard for most of these things.

**Bruce Moody:**

Okay. All right.

**Hilary Rudy:**

Thanks, Brianna.

**Bruce Moody:**

So I mentioned that I was in the Navy for 20 years, and I truly voted differently every single time. And the one way I never voted was in person. It just never worked out for me. But a lot of military people are going to vote in person. Families as well. So what are the most important things that people need to know about voting locally? What do they need to know about their local polling locations and hours, that sort of thing?

**Brianna Lennon:**

In Missouri, our polling places are open from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. And we also do have a two-week no-excuse absentee voting period. So those would be just the normal office hours of your local election authority, but for two weeks up to the election, you can vote in person. And for military voters in Missouri, if you show up at a polling place that would be your polling place because of where you live, and you have not registered to vote, we still have a special ballot that has federal and statewide issues on it specifically for military voters. So if you do happen to be at home unexpectedly, and you haven't

requested your absentee ballot, or even if you have, you haven't sent it back yet, if you go to a polling place on election day, we will be able to help you cast a ballot in person.

**Hilary Rudy:**

Here's another area where the laws really are going to vary from state to state. In Colorado, we have two weeks of early voting as well, and in Colorado if you happen to be home, what's important to know about voting in person is that you can go to any location in your county. It's a good idea to look up your polling location and see what the hours are. Counties have a lot of options. For example, in Colorado Springs, they've got a location actually on base at Fort Carson. So there are a lot of really convenient options. But it's really important to check those timelines in terms of when locations are open. And also important, I think, to know what you need to bring with you to vote. So in Colorado, you need to bring some ID with you to vote. There are a lot of options for ID. You need that to vote in person.

**Bruce Moody:**

Okay. But again, Colorado is cool. So it varies from state to state. We really want to emphasize that, it does vary. You got to check your state guidelines. And especially, voting season kind of happens after moving season for a lot of military families. And when you're moving a family across the country, you've got a lot of concerns and maybe figuring out the how to vote puzzle is not top of the list. Understandable. So you really want to make sure you understand your state guidelines. Take some time to really get familiar with them, how things vary state to state.

I want to get into another question here, and that is military life, people are on duty. So how can you accommodate service members who may be on duty during election day but still want to vote in person? What are the options?

**Hilary Rudy:**

I think that's another question that really is going to vary from state to state. But in general, I think it's really important to contact your local election official to know what your options are. And I think the best way to do that is to use the Federal Voting Assistance Program, [fvap.gov](http://fvap.gov). You can access your state information really easily there so that you can get directly to your state information, and many states offer pre-election day options. So if you want to vote in person, there is an option to vote in person ahead of election day. And I think the best way to know what those options are are just to go directly to the source, to your local election officials.

**Bruce Moody:**

You mentioned FVAP, or the Federal Voting Assistance Program. It's actually part of the Department of Defense, folks. So we're going to put a link in the program notes. You can always reach out to them. Awesome people, and they've got a lot of answers for you.

Let's get back to some of the common challenges that military voters face and how are local and state election officials addressing them.

**Brianna Lennon:**

I think the number one thing that we hear is how do we get the ballot back? What's our preferred way of getting the ballot returned back to us by mail? And I think that's tricky because depending on where you are stationed, where you're living overseas, there's going to be huge differences in the mail stream and whether you have a very good mail system or whether you know it's going to take a while, whether you have to work through the embassy or anything like that. And so we try, as best we can, from our local office to be able to get up to speed on what some of these other places have as their regular mail delivery. And we do provide, when we email out the ballots, some prefabricated envelopes that you can fold and tape and put it back in the mail. And it at least has a designation on it that once it hits United States Postal Service that it will be able to go through the system.

**Hilary Rudy:**

And I would jump in and say, I agree, Brianna, we need to keep having a discussion about the mail issue. I think in addition to the mail delivery issue, one of the most common issues that we hear about is just how mobile our voters are, and that it's not always top of mind to be thinking about registration and voting when you are changing duty locations or being deployed. So really just trying to make sure that we're communicating often and frequently with our voters. And so we're doing that both at the state and the local level and really also communicating about the challenges of mail and offering options.

If mail is the only option, we're talking a lot with our voters about how quickly they can get that ballot into the local mail stream, remembering to use that envelope that you can tape up and tape together, or making use of embassy mail service or private courier. We see a lot of ballots coming back real close to the election through DHL sometimes. But all of those options aren't available in every location, and so it's sometimes about understanding what options are available and talking with our voters and figuring out what's going to work best.

**Bruce Moody:**

Are there any changes being considered to further support the voting process for service members and their families? This is for future elections.

**Brianna Lennon:**

I think we're seeing a shift, I want to say in the last 10 years, the concept of having a statewide portal that Missouri has, that Colorado has, that allows people to log on themselves and then pull down a ballot and then print it, that is in the last 10 years a pretty new and positive change that we've seen happen. I think that there will probably be some sort of movement. I know security and access are always a hard nut to crack when it comes to weighing email back your ballot, but we want to make sure that it's encrypted or that it's a secure process and things like that. I think as we are making developments on things like statewide portals for sending ballots, we'll also see some



movement on return. But returning ballots through a portal has a lot more obstacles. But I am optimistic that that's the direction that we're moving in.

**Hilary Rudy:**

Yeah, I agree. I think that's been one of the best developments over the last 10 years or so, the ability for voters to go get their ballot themselves. It really shortcuts the front end of that mail timeframe. I think also, we're seeing more and more data available to us to help us understand the transit time, to help us understand the challenges that might be more regional. And the more of that data we have about ballot transit times, about how long it's taking for a ballot to make it from a regional mail service into the U.S. Postal Service, that data is going to help us, I think, look at creative ways to solve some of these challenges. But I think I agree with Brianna about the portal, probably one of the best developments that we've seen to move things forward.

**Bruce Moody:**

Interesting. Hilary and Brianna, I'm so grateful to have this conversation with you. As we wrap up, I invite you to share any final resources or outreach efforts that are specifically aimed at helping military families and service members navigate the voting process. Brianna, let's start with you.

**Brianna Lennon:**

Yeah. I know it's come up before, and we talked about it, but the Federal Voting Assistance Program is a awesome resource for people. It's the one that we point people to when they need to fill out a Federal Postcard Application or if they're just looking for general information. We love working with FVAP, and I know that we get very positive responses from our military and overseas voters when we link them up together. So that's a really great resource.

And then again, your local election authority or your Secretary of State's office, your state elections office is going to be great to be able to contact someone directly about what you specifically need to do, how to get your ballot, if you have questions about things on your ballot, all of those are going to be answered by your election officials. So finding them, which is also tying back to FVAP has a really great locator on there for people to be able to figure out what state they should be working within and who they should be contacting. Those are the two resources that we know are most important for our military and overseas voters. Our website and the Federal Voting Assistant Program website.

**Hilary Rudy:**

Brianna nailed it. We absolutely agree.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah. So we're going to link to the Federal Voting Assistance Program. I totally agree. I will third that. I guess that's what you say. And the Federal Voting Assistance Program is actually part of the Department of Defense, so it's a pleasure to be able to steer people

to them, as well as it is to say thank you to Brianna Lennon and Hilary Rudy. Thank you to the both of you for joining us today.

**Hilary Rudy:**

Thank you so much for having me.

**Brianna Lennon:**

Yeah, thank you. This has been awesome.

**Bruce Moody:**

Good, good. Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you, so click on the link in the program notes to send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for a future episode. Be sure to subscribe to this episode 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 today. Take care. Bye-bye.