CSG joins forces with Department of Defense to improve overseas voting

For decades, U.S. military personnel, overseas citizens and their dependents have faced many barriers when attempting to vote in U.S. elections. A January 2009 Pew Center on the States survey found that in the 2008 presidential election, 25 states did not provide enough time for U.S. overseas voters to cast ballots and have their votes counted.

That same study found that close to 30 percent of military and overseas ballots were rejected or returned as undeliverable or lost. To address these problems, the U.S. Department of Defense launched the Electronic Absentee System for Elections grant program.

To date, five Midwestern states (Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin) have received funding to administer pilot programs featuring new U.S. overseas voting services — online voter registration, ballot requests, blank-ballot delivery and ballot tracking, for example. South Dakota Secretary of State Jason Gant credits recent changes in his state for turning “a 60-day process into a transaction that takes less than 30 minutes.”

Additional funds have been used by states to develop single points of contact in election offices. The resulting data from the grant program are also being used to identify problems and develop policy solutions to improve the system.

In September 2013, The Council of State Governments established an Overseas Voting Initiative in partnership with the U.S. Department of Defense and the Federal Voting Assistance Program to:

- Provide technical support to two advisory groups that will focus on policies and technologies to improve voting for military personnel and overseas citizens.
- Disseminate policies and other resources tailored for federal and state policymaking audiences.
- Provide in-depth research and evaluations of state and local election practices.
- Deliver support to the Federal Voting Assistance Program in its evaluation of election performance.

Kamanzi Kalisa is serving as director of CSG’s Overseas Voting Initiative. He can be reached at kkalisa@csg.org.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Total # of overseas ballots cast</th>
<th>% of all mailed ballots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>1,607</td>
<td>(81.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>1,209</td>
<td>(77.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>2,003</td>
<td>(76.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>4,131</td>
<td>(80.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>11,374</td>
<td>(79.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>6,765</td>
<td>(68.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>5,009</td>
<td>(89.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>17,810</td>
<td>(72.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15,709</td>
<td>(76.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission

* Data may not be complete in some states due to differing rates of response among local jurisdictions
** Data not available