



Secure Families Initiative

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STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

U.S. COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION

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“Why the Wait? Unpacking California’s Untimely Election Counting Process”

Secure Families Initiative (SFI)

Secure Families Initiative (SFI) is a nonpartisan 501(c)(4) nonprofit that trains and mobilizes diverse military partners, parents, kids, and loved ones to be voters and advocates on issues that impact them and their communities. We especially encourage military family members to get involved in issues related to foreign policy and national security, as military families know better than most the consequences that wars abroad have here at home.

SFI regularly partners with its sister organization, Secure Families Foundation (SFF): a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit that educates military families and civilian supporters on the ways in which foreign policy impacts the military community.

Neither organization receives funding from the U.S. government or any foreign entity.

Rebecca Nowatchik

Rebecca Nowatchik is the Director of External Partnerships at Secure Families Initiative. She is an educator, facilitator, and advocate with 20+ years of experience managing successful programs focused on improving community and workplace wellbeing, and increasing civic engagement and voter participation. Rebecca's experience as a military spouse has fueled her passion to improve the lives of all military families.

Rebecca co-leads SFI's nonpartisan military voter educational programs, which aim to close the voter participation gap between Uniformed and Overseas voters (UOCAVA) and civilian voters. Prior to joining the SFI team, Rebecca has worked as an educator, developed community education curriculum, and has served in an executive role at a community organization focused on improving community health and quality of life. Rebecca holds a B.S in Health Science Education for the State University College at Brockport and a Masters in Nonprofit Management from Canisius College.

Chairman Steil, Ranking Member Morelle, Members of the Committee: I thank you for the invitation to speak today on the topic of election administration in California.

My name is Rebecca Nowatchik. I am the Director of External Partnerships at Secure Families Initiative (SFI). SFI is a nonpartisan organization that strengthens the voices of diverse military families as an active and influential constituency on the issues that directly impact our lives.

As part of my role, I co-lead our nonpartisan military voter educational programs, which aim at closing the voter participation gap between the military and civilian communities. SFI's military voter education programs have been recognized nationally and highlighted as a key information source for active-duty families by the Department of Defense (DoD).

We also lead the Military Vote Coalition (MVC), a nonpartisan coalition of 20+ military family and veteran support organizations, united by our mission to protect this constituency's access to the ballot box through advocacy and outreach.

Personally, my first-hand knowledge both as a military spouse and the daughter of a combat veteran has fueled me to connect members of our community to the policy conversations that directly impact our daily lives. I am here today representing SFI, not to advocate for any partisan outcome, but to ensure that the community we represent is at the table where our access to the ballot box is being discussed by lawmakers. The topic of today's hearing has profound importance for our military community.

Military families reflect America. Military families come from all 54 states and territories, and the District of Columbia. They come from rural areas, small and large towns, and cities. They have a variety of educational experiences and backgrounds. They include members from every ethnic group, religion, and sexual orientation. Nearly 50% of service members are Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color; over 50% are under 30 years-old; and 92% of military spouses are women.

The military community is a network of families stationed all over the world. Most active-duty families move every two or three years. In addition to these moves' disruption of our established support networks, changes in our children's education and social lives, and limits on our employment and career paths, these moves also impact our ability to vote.

I'd like to share a couple of concrete examples of what this experience can look like:

One military spouse reported to SFI that her home state within the continental U.S. mailed her absentee ballot all the way to the installation at Hawaii where her family was stationed – only to have it sent back to her permanent home address with no explanation, never even making it from the post office to her temporary home on the same base in Hawaii. She didn't vote that year due to this mail delivery error.

One of SFI's members was assigned to a duty station on a Canadian military installation (rather than a U.S. run-and-operated base). As a result, she did not have access to U.S. postal service. When a U.S. election occurred, she had to pay out of pocket for a courier service in order to send back her mail-in ballot, which was extremely expensive.

Even families without horror stories as extreme as these face routine mail delivery delays when living far away from home, which are entirely out of our hands. For example, families stationed all the way in Japan have shared examples of mail regularly taking 6-8 weeks to arrive.

Military voters face steep logistical barriers to casting their ballots, especially when deployed, stationed overseas, and frequently relocating. With these examples in mind, it may come as no surprise that in 2020 (the last presidential election for which the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) has reported data to Congress), [military voters were 27% less likely to have voted than their civilian counterparts](#) (see page 14).

According to FVAP, when a military voter tries to vote but is ultimately unsuccessful, [the most common reason is because their ballot arrives past the deadline](#) (see page 57). The second most common reason comes when a military voter's ballot gets rejected for something like a missing signature or date, and the voter isn't notified or provided an opportunity to "cure" the ballot by the deadline (see page 57).

That's why SFI, with support from our nonpartisan nonprofit community, has long advocated for policies that would tackle these top issues facing our voters. [In 2023, we consolidated a list of legislative priorities that included](#): 1) Enabling ballots that are postmarked by Election Day to arrive at least 7 days after Election Day and still be counted, and 2) Ensuring timely ballot rejection notifications and robust ballot-curing opportunities for voters.

Incidentally, both these policies are true for California, home to the largest number of active-duty service members in the United States, and also one of the largest Uniformed and Overseas Citizens (UOCAVA) voting populations. These two policies may lead to longer wait times for election results. But more importantly, they go a long way toward protecting eligible voters from disenfranchisement. Military and overseas voters should have the same opportunity as our civilian counterparts to be maximally deliberative about our choices at the ballot box. And that is much more important than our impatience for certified election results.

Why do military families care so much about voting? Because voting carries a profound gravity for us. The right to vote is a cornerstone of the democracy that we as military families serve to protect. We sacrifice so much every day in order to keep the American experiment of representative government alive. And that democracy can only work if every person has full access to the ballot box, military and civilian alike. Every time our right to vote is suppressed, these attacks — as they have always been in our country's history — stem from who deserves the right to choose the people who make decisions that impact our day-to-day lives. We believe that military families should have that right, just like every American.

There are two proposed federal policy changes currently in motion — the SAVE Act, which this chamber advanced earlier this month, and the March 25th Executive Order regarding voter registration requirements. Both take American elections in the opposite direction of where military voters need them to go.

For example, one of the barriers the SAVE Act may impose on voters would be requiring voters to bring passports or birth certificates *in person* to their election office in order to register. This means that 1) Military families would no longer be able to register from a far-away duty station, and 2) Military families would no longer be able to use a driver's license, military ID, or Tribal ID as sufficient documentation. In fact, if a person were born overseas (for example, a voting-aged military child who was born during their service member parent's overseas duty assignment) – or, if a person has changed their first or last name since birth (for instance, folks like me who changed her last name after marriage) – using a birth certificate might not be sufficient documentation by itself either.

The March 25th Executive Order from the White House would similarly undermine the ability for military families to access the ballot box, were it to be implemented. The order imposes barriers on U.S. citizens just trying to exercise their constitutional right to vote by requiring burdensome and redundant paperwork, and by shrinking the timeline in which we can return our ballots from far away. The order would mean that for the military family stationed halfway across the world from home, who crossed every “t” and dotted every “i” when casting their ballot: 1) Their military ID will no longer suffice, and 2) Mail delays outside of their control could mean their ballot will never count.

Decades of advocacy from voters have resulted in a robust set of laws governing voter registration, voter identification and verification, and the transmission of ballots to voters who are active-duty military and overseas citizens. Each state, including the State of California, has a rigorous system of checks and balances that ensures only eligible voters are voting. State Boards of Elections verify the identity and eligibility of voters by cross-referencing their information (like ID numbers, signature matching, etc.) against existing databases. This rigor takes time, just like it takes time to ensure the military spouse's ballot coming all the way from a military installation in South Korea is able to arrive and be counted in his home state of California.

In closing: I urge this committee, as well as every other body in Congress that is debating policies which have the capacity to make voting either easier or harder for Americans serving their country from far away: don't abandon us. Don't abandon military families.