

**Testimony of Carye L. Blaney
County Clerk, Monongalia County, West Virginia**

**Before the U.S. Elections Assistance Commission
May 19, 2009
Washington, D.C.**

“Military and Overseas Citizens: Counting Their Votes - Part 1”

Honorable Chairwoman Beach, Vice-Chair Hillman, Commissioner Davidson, Executive Director Wilkey and members of the U.S. Election Commission staff;

Good afternoon, my name is Carye Blaney and I am honored to serve as the County Clerk in Monongalia County, West Virginia. I thank you for the invitation to testify before you today in regard to the importance of doing everything possible to make the election process more accessible to our Military and Overseas voters.

I bring you greetings from our West Virginia Secretary of State's Office and our entire West Virginia County Clerk's Association. It is indeed gratifying to partner with the U.S. Election Assistance Commission in effecting positive changes in our nation's election laws.

I have had the privilege of serving as County Clerk since March 2007. Previous to becoming County Clerk I had worked for over 20 years in our County Assessor's Office. I earned a Bachelor's of Administration Degree in Accounting in 1993 and a Master's Degree in Public Administration in 1999 both from West Virginia University. I have devoted my entire career in public service to the citizens of my home county and the people of West Virginia.

In the State of West Virginia a County Clerk is responsible for numerous operations. We are the official recorder of all county documents including deeds, deeds of trusts, releases, and leases; we serve as the Secretary for the County Commission; we handle the probate of all estates, provide all birth and death certificates; issue marriage licenses and certificates; handle all the budget and payroll for the County and various other miscellaneous duties; and last but not least, we serve as the Chief Election Official in our county. New voter registrations are processed and changes are made daily, then every two years we convert our offices into running two labor intensive processes at the same time. As you can see, we wear many hats.

West Virginia is a comparatively small State with a statewide population of approximately 1.8 million. Many counties and municipalities across the nation service a much larger population in

an urban setting. I am glad this Commission is interested in the perspective of small town, rural America. West Virginia is a very proud State with a rich heritage steeped in patriotic service. We take our elections and voting very seriously. We support our active military and we honor our veterans. I can assure you the West Virginia Secretary of State and every County Clerk in West Virginia considers military and overseas voting a very important issue.

For the 2008 elections the West Virginia Secretary of State allowed each county the option of participating in the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP). The Defense Department has taken great strides to administer the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA). During this first year of participation only twelve counties in West Virginia chose to allow the use of fax machines or email to transmit and receive absentee ballot communications with UOCAVA voters. Our office in Monongalia County participated and processed thirty UOCAVA absentee ballots via facsimile.

In Monongalia County we have a functional web page we use to provide election information to our citizens in regard to their own personal voter registration (whether or not they are currently registered), voting precinct locations and calendar deadlines. We also have a specific email address dedicated to handling all questions or concerns involving the election process. We received a tremendous number of emails from voters with questions about applying for and receiving an absentee ballot. Many voters still opted to transmit their ballot using the United States Postal Service (USPS). For some it was due to the lack of access to electronic equipment where they were located. For others, I am sure it was apprehension in deviating from the same method of absentee voting as has been used in all elections past. Some had concerns about giving up their lack of privacy and opted to use the traditional method.

When a Military voter requests an absentee ballot during an election, the Military address is logged onto a Military mailing list and retained for a two year period, so not only will the voter receive an absentee ballot for the current election applied for, they will also receive the material and application for the next election. There are challenges in maintaining this mailing list because the majority of Military voters do

not stay at the same location for two years. Consequently, our local offices process communications to these individuals and the mail is returned. With the rapidly increasing price in postage, our counties shoulder a heavy financial burden.

In Monongalia County, we did receive concerns from the voters who opted to transmit their ballot to our office using a fax machine. Through Federal Voting Assistance Program the Department of Defense serves as an intermediate auditor between the voter and our local election office. Transmittals from our office to the voter using fax or email are sent to the Department of Defense and then forwarded onto the voter. Several voters contacted our office directly because of the time delay in our transmitting the ballot material and the voter actually receiving it. There is a certain amount of time necessary for the Department of Defense to process the ballots. These voters assumed that when providing their personal fax numbers to our local election office, processing would be a seamless line between their physical location and our office.

I have also had the opportunity to listen to voters who were overseas and had difficulty in receiving and resending election material through the mail. In one particular instance, an overseas voter applied for an absentee ballot by mail prior to the first day absentee ballots could be mailed before the 2008 General Election. The absentee ballot was mailed via standard postal mail by the county on the first day allowed for processing. The voter received the ballot four days prior to the election. It took almost 3 weeks to get to its destination. The voter immediately completed the ballot and paperwork and paid \$50 to Federal Express to return the ballot to the respective county. Upon returning to the United States the voter checked with the local election office to verify if the ballot had been received and was informed it was received but after the canvassing period had ended and the election had been certified. Consequently, this voter was not exactly happy to have incurred such a huge financial expense and burden only to find out the ballot had not been processed.

In a second scenario, a military voter was complaining because they were not aware they could receive an absentee ballot from their home county. They were under the impression the only option was the use of the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB).

The letter of invitation to appear before you today asked for solutions, creative innovations and recommendations for providing the same level of customer service to UOCAVA voters as we do to our stateside voters.

An increased marketing effort to the active military and their families would provide a solution to those UOCAVA voters who are not aware they can cast their ballot with their local election official in a more efficient and expedited manner than before. Many United States Embassies do send out information to United States Citizens registered with the Embassy and living abroad, but many voters do not take advantage of the opportunity because of either a past experience of difficulty or they are under the impression their only option is the use of the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot.

In comparing the customer service given to stateside voters who cast an absentee ballot and UOCAVA voters casting the same ballot – there is a financial expense to the overseas voter in returning the ballot to our office. A stateside absentee ballot is sent to the voter including a postage paid return envelope. Our local office cannot include a postage paid return envelope to an overseas voter because United State’s postage is not recognized outside our borders for return purposes.

In addition to the use of the fax machine and email, an innovative and creative way to provide an inexpensive alternative for UOCAVA voters would be to allow the use of a web cam in casting the absentee ballot directly with the local election official or taking advantage of some of the new technology available through vendors who have developed applications and processes to allow the electronic submission of a ballot in a way that provides greater accessibility, security, privacy and efficiency at a lower cost. These innovations would allow the voter to communicate directly with the local election office and would decrease the number of persons involved in the processing of an

individual ballot, thus taking steps to further protect the voter's right to privacy.

Along the lines of recommendations for improvements to the system would be the implementation of one centralized location in each state responsible for handling the absentee voting process for UOCAVA voters. This could be done through the Secretary of State's Office. This would assure the UOCAVA voter their ballot would be received securely, its sanctity would be protected and it could be processed expeditiously. The cost savings to local election officials in hardware, software, labor, postage and time would be significant.

Since taking office a little over two years ago, I have worked very hard to make sure our office has used every technology available to provide more efficient customer service to the citizens of Monongalia County. The use of progressive electronic technology has been our hallmark. One lesson I have learned is change never happens as quickly as you want it to. It is a process. There have been numerous improvements to our election system in the last decade and there are more opportunities for improvement in the future.

In closing, please accept my appreciation once again for the opportunity to participate in this conversation with you today. West Virginia stands ready to assist the Commission in whatever way possible to improve our election system for UOCAVA voters.

I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.

Statistics from the 2008 General Election:*

Number of registered voters in West Virginia	1,212,117
Number of registered voters in Monongalia County	54,262
Number of counties in West Virginia	55
Number of ballots cast in West Virginia	736,799
Number of ballots cast in Monongalia County	34,435
Number of absentee ballots cast in West Virginia	18,409
Number of absentee ballots cast in Monongalia County	804
Number of West Virginia UOCAVA voters (Source: Federal Voting Assistance Program):	
a. Uniformed Service	9,814
b. Uniformed Service family members	7,400
c. WV overseas citizens/expatriate	<u>25,500</u>
d. Total: (estimated)	42,714
Total # of UOCAVA ballots in WV from overseas voters	321
Total # of UOCAVA ballots from in WV from military	2,053
Total number of absentee ballots by fax in WV	102
Total number of absentee ballots by fax in Monongalia Co	30
Total number of counties in WV accepting fax ballots	12
Total priority mail costs in WV for overseas ballots	\$1,546