

Reps. Coffman, Courtney Call For Inclusion of Voting Protections For Service Members Abroad In FY2010 Defense Reauthorization Bill

(WASHINGTON, DC) – Representatives Mike Coffman (R-CO) and Joe Courtney (D-CT) spearheaded a bipartisan letter urging support for the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act in the final conference report of the Fiscal Year 2010 Defense Authorization Act. Signed by 79 Members of the House of Representatives, the letter was sent to Chairman Ike Skelton (D-MO) and Ranking Member Buck McKeon (R-CA) of the House Armed Services Committee, and to Chairman Levin (D-MI) and Ranking Member McCain (R-AZ) of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Coffman commented, “Having spent more than twenty years in the military, I understand firsthand how challenging, and at times frustrating, it can be for service members to vote. We owe it to our men and women in uniform to do everything possible to ensure that their ballots are counted and we must break down the barriers that all too often stand in their way when trying to access their right to vote.”

“There is nothing more fundamental to our democracy than the right of every eligible citizen to vote, and that means protecting the right of those who are serving overseas to have their vote counted,” stated Courtney. “While our troops are deployed in combat zones across the globe defending the rights of others during their own national elections, the least we can do is to ensure the timely processing of our service members’ ballots.”

The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) has helped an estimated six million Americans abroad vote in federal elections, including those serving in our military, their spouses and family, and civilians living and working overseas. Recent elections, however, have highlighted faults and limitations with UOCAVA and current election laws – especially for those deployed abroad in the military.

The MOVE Act, added to the defense authorization bill by the Senate as a bipartisan

amendment, would ensure that American troops and citizens abroad can participate in future elections. It would require states to allow military and overseas voters to request and receive election materials electronically, provide a 45-day window for requesting ballots before an election, and expand the use of the federal "fail safe" ballot. It would also prohibit the rejection of an absentee ballot due to the lack of a notary stamp or other unnecessary requirements, which are hard to meet in combat zones.

The text of the letter is below:

#

October 5, 2009

The Honorable Ike Skelton

Chairman

House Armed Services Committee

2165 Rayburn House Office Building

Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Buck McKeon

Ranking Member

House Armed Services Committee

2165 Rayburn House Office Building

Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Carl Levin

Chairman

Senate Armed Services Committee

228 Russell Senate Office Building

Washington , DC 20510

The Honorable John McCain

Ranking Member

Senate Armed Services Committee

228 Russell Senate Office Building

Washington , DC 20510

Dear Chairman Skelton and Levin, and Ranking Members McKeon and McCain:

As you conference on the Fiscal Year 2010 National Defense Authorization bill, we write to urge your support for improvements to military and overseas absentee voting included in the Senate version of the bill.

For over two decades, the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) has helped an estimated six million Americans abroad vote in federal elections – including those serving in our military, their spouses and family, and civilians living and working overseas.

However, the experience of military and overseas voters in recent elections, as well as independent assessments of the limitations of current law, highlights the critical need to take action now to ensure that our troops and citizens abroad have the resources they need to participate in future elections.

For example, according to the Election Assistance Commission, more than 660,000 of the 992,034 military and overseas absentee ballots requested for the 2006 election never reached election officials. In addition, in a study conducted by the Overseas Vote Foundation, more than half of surveyed military and overseas voters who tried to vote absentee by mail in 2008 were unable to do so because their requested ballots either were received too late to be counted or were not received at all. Further, the Pew Center on the States released a report in January 2009 showing that 25 states and the District of Columbia do not provide adequate time for military personnel or citizens overseas to vote and have their ballots counted due to barriers such as notary requirements and the lack of electronic transmission of election materials.

At a May 13, 2009 hearing, the Senate Rules Committee released a study finding that one in four ballots requested by U.S. military personnel deployed overseas went uncounted in the 2008 election. The study found that of 441,000 absentee ballots requested in 2008 by eligible overseas voters in seven high-military population states, election officials never received 98,633. Including another 13,504 ballots that were rejected for various other reasons, including a missing signature or failure to notarize, one-fourth of the requested ballots were not counted, according to the study.

Further, first-hand experience by many of our colleagues traveling to visit our troops abroad – both those stationed on the front lines and at bases across the world – has found clear frustration with current overseas military voting policy. In many cases, service members have expressed their concern that they did not feel like they had enough information, assistance, or time to request, receive, complete and return their absentee ballots for the 2008 election. It is critical that we not let another election go by without addressing these concerns.

It is clear that action must be taken to ensure that our military serving in harms way, as well as citizens living and working abroad, need help in breaking down the barriers that too often stand in their way when trying to access their right to vote. To this end, we strongly support subtitle H of the Senate bill, cited as the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act, and ask for your support for it in conference.

This section, based on bipartisan legislation added to the bill in a unanimous voice vote, would make needed improvements to UOCAVA and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) to correct the critical points of failure that have prevented military and overseas citizens from exercising their fundamental right to vote. Specifically, this section will eliminate unnecessary barriers to registration and voting, improve methods for voter registration and ballot requests, ensure UOCAVA voters are educated on their rights and have ready access to voter information, and facilitate cooperation among governmental entities to allow military and overseas citizens to successfully have their ballots cast and counted.

Again, we ask for your strong support and respectfully request that you maintain subtitle H of S.1390 in conference. We look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure that our men and women in uniform, as well as US citizens living and working abroad, have the tools they need to access their right to vote. Thank you, as always, for your commitment to our men and women in uniform.

Sincerely,

###