

Testimony for the Maryland State Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Hearing on SB0488 – Electronic Ballot Return System, Study and Request for Proposals

Friday, February 24th at 1:00pm

Good afternoon. My name is Sarah Streyder, and I am the spouse of an active-duty U.S. Space Force Guardian. I am also the Executive Director of Secure Families Initiative – a nonpartisan nonprofit organization committed to elevating military partners and family members as voters and advocates for their communities. Last year, I was awarded AFI Military Spouse of the Year for this work.

SFI supports Senate Bill 488 and thanks Senator Brooks for sponsoring it. This legislation is a promising first step in the direction of securely easing the voting process for absentee military voters.

When military service members and their families are stationed far away from home, it can be an isolating and frustrating experience. Getting to vote in elections back home can help families stay connected and ease the transition – it’s a reminder of where we belong and an affirmation that our input matters.

Unfortunately, absentee military voters face high logistical barriers to cast our ballots through existing methods. Military families stationed overseas or in rural domestic locations often face long wait times for mail delivery and return – and that was true even before the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this problem. Additionally, overseas military families who aren’t stationed near a U.S. military installation don’t have access to military postal services, which requires them to pay steep international postage fees just to vote.

As a result, military voters have shockingly low voter participation rates. In 2020, only 47% of uniformed service members and a mere 8% of overseas citizens voted, compared to 74% of our civilian counterparts. Many of us wanted to vote but were unable due to unnecessary and arbitrary obstacles.

SFI is confident that a study of electronic voting methods will illuminate numerous examples where this is already being done smoothly and securely. We strongly encourage Maryland to take this step toward joining the 32 other states and D.C. that allow military service members and dependents to cast their ballot electronically. Doing so would lift a huge weight off our shoulders.

When we move every few years, we already have to worry about finding work, picking the best school for our kids, and meeting our new doctor, often while bridging a language barrier. On top of all that, voting requires the added hassle of finding a post office, calculating proper postage, paying out of pocket, and keeping track of state-specific deadlines – all just to participate in the very democracy we serve to protect.

Thank you for listening. We are invested in this issue and plan to continue monitoring this legislation’s process.

Sarah Streyder

Executive Director

Secure Families Initiative