



April 2016

ELECTIONS

DOD Needs More Comprehensive Planning to Address Military and Overseas Absentee Voting Challenges

Why GAO Did This Study

The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act generally protects the rights of military personnel and overseas citizens to register and vote absentee in federal elections. In 2014, the most recently completed federal election, the Election Assistance Commission estimated that around 6 percent, or 8,500 of the 146,000 ballots submitted by voters covered under the act, were rejected. DOD's Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) generally implements many of the act's provisions and provides absentee voting support.

GAO was asked to review matters related to FVAP. GAO assesses the extent to which DOD has (1) identified challenges with its military and overseas voting assistance efforts and developed plans to address those challenges, and (2) implemented strategic planning practices to help ensure the long-term effectiveness of FVAP. GAO reviewed 2010-14 post-election surveys, 2014-15 DOD-commissioned studies, and compared documentation of FVAP plans with leading federal strategic planning practices; and interviewed FVAP officials and program stakeholders.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD establish time frames for actions FVAP identified to address challenges, fully implement the selected leading practices of federal strategic planning into its day-to-day operations, and develop a strategic plan that fully exhibits the six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning. DOD generally concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-16-378](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

ELECTIONS

DOD Needs More Comprehensive Planning to Address Military and Overseas Absentee Voting Challenges

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD), through its Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP), has taken steps to identify challenges and needed improvements to its military and overseas absentee voting assistance efforts. However, two long-standing issues—limited awareness of resources for voters and the unpredictable postal delivery of absentee ballots—continue to pose challenges. DOD-commissioned studies and post-election survey results indicate that there is limited awareness of FVAP's resources among military and overseas voters. A 2015 study found, for example, that the online availability of blank ballots led to one of the most significant improvements in military and overseas absentee voting. At the same time, the full benefits of the improvement had not been realized because voters remained unaware that ballots could be requested online. Regarding the unpredictable postal delivery of absentee ballots, the timeliness of a voter's receipt or return of an absentee ballot depends on a number of variables, such as the mode and speed of transportation used to transmit mail. DOD has identified actions that it will take to address these and other issues. However, these challenges persist, in part, because DOD has not established time frames for completing the actions it has identified.

DOD's implementation of FVAP partially exhibits six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning. As shown below, the program exhibits some, but not all, of the characteristics that make up each practice.

Six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning	Partial implementation of practice
Define the mission and goals	FVAP has revised its mission, purpose, and strategic goals, but has not made them publicly available
Define strategies that address management challenges and identify resources needed to achieve goals	DOD has identified challenges and some actions, but not fully identified strategies and resources to address challenges associated with postal delivery of ballots
Ensure leadership involvement and accountability	Leadership of FVAP has stabilized, but DOD has not fully established and institutionalized mechanisms to help ensure the accountability of the FVAP leadership
Involve stakeholders	DOD communicates with stakeholders, but has not fully involved all of its stakeholders in the development of the program's mission and goals
Coordinate with other federal agencies	DOD coordinates with other federal agencies, but did not fully include them in the development of the program's mission, goals, and strategies
Develop and use performance measures	DOD uses some performance metrics, but does not use metrics to evaluate FVAP's progress toward achieving its goals

Source: GAO Analysis of DOD data. | GAO-16-378

According to officials, as of February 2016, DOD did not have a long-term, comprehensive strategy, such as a strategic plan, for its voting assistance program, to institutionalize existing practices and establish accountability for efforts that need further development—such as those related to the partially exhibited leading practices identified. Without a comprehensive strategic plan that institutionalizes a long-term vision, it will be difficult for FVAP to respond to the dynamic nature of the voting environment and frequent turnover in program leadership, and to demonstrate progress in addressing its long-standing challenges.

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Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
FVAP	Federal Voting Assistance Program
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act
MPSA	Military Postal Service Agency
UOCAVA	Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act

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April 20, 2016

Congressional Addressees

U.S. servicemembers and citizens living overseas undertake a complex, multistep process to vote in a U.S. election—the success of which relies, in part, on the coordinated efforts of federal, state, and local governments to help ensure that voters are aware of and comply with applicable laws and regulations. The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA), passed in 1986 and subsequently amended, facilitates such coordination in part by defining the roles of the federal, state, and local governments in protecting the right for military servicemembers, their families, and U.S. citizens living overseas to vote absentee in federal elections.¹ Under UOCAVA, the Department of Defense (DOD) is generally responsible for establishing and maintaining a program to assist all eligible voters to register to vote and cast a ballot. Specifically, the Secretary of Defense is the presidential designee with the primary responsibility for federal functions under UOCAVA and, through the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, provides support to potential UOCAVA voters to facilitate their participation in federal elections.²

DOD has reported that UOCAVA voters—which it estimated included over 6 million citizens living outside the United States—had their ballots rejected at a higher rate than non-UOCAVA voters, primarily because they were received by local election offices after each election’s deadline.³ Further, the Election Assistance Commission, a national

¹See generally 52 U.S.C. §§ 20301-20311. Initially codified at sections 1973ff through 1973ff-7 of Title 42, U.S. Code, UOCAVA has been amended by legislation since 1986 and recently transferred to Title 52. In this report we refer generally to chapter 203 of Title 52, U.S. Code as UOCAVA.

²Executive Order 12642 designated the Secretary of Defense as the presidential designee under UOCAVA. See Exec. Order No. 12642, 53 Fed. Reg. 21,975 (June 8, 1988).

³Federal Voting Assistance Program, *2014 Post-Election Report to Congress* (June 2015); Federal Voting Assistance Program, *2012 Post-Election Report to Congress* (June 2013); Federal Voting Assistance Program, *2010 Post-Election Survey Report to Congress* (September 2011), and Federal Voting Assistance Program, *Eighteenth Report: 2008 Post Election Survey Report* (March 2011).

clearinghouse of information on election administration, estimated that approximately 6 percent of UOCAVA absentee ballots from U.S. citizens living overseas were rejected by local election offices in the 2012 and 2014 general election cycles, while the rejection rate for domestic absentee ballots returned during the same election cycles was approximately 1 percent. See appendix I for additional information about the rates and reasons for UOCAVA ballot rejection in the past four elections.

Between 2001 and 2010, we issued four reports on absentee voting by servicemembers and U.S. citizens living overseas that included a total of 12 recommendations intended to help DOD improve the direction, oversight, and evaluation of FVAP services.⁴ Specifically, in these reports we reviewed FVAP's evaluation activities, including its post-election surveys and performance measures, and how FVAP evaluates the training that it provides to the military services' voting assistance officers.⁵ DOD concurred or partially concurred with all 12 recommendations and has taken action to implement 8 of them. See appendix II for a description of the recommendations from these reports, and additional details about the actions that DOD took in response.

House Report 114-102 included a provision for us to review matters related to the effectiveness of DOD's Federal Voting Assistance Program,⁶ and the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform requested a similar review. This report assesses the extent to

⁴GAO, *Elections: DOD Can Strengthen Evaluation of Its Absentee Voting Assistance Program*, [GAO-10-476](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 17, 2010); GAO, *Elections: Action Plans Needed to Fully Address Challenges in Electronic Absentee Voting Initiatives for Military and Overseas Citizens*, [GAO-07-774](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 14, 2007); GAO, *Elections: Absentee Voting Assistance to Military and Overseas Citizens Increased for the 2004 General Election, but Challenges Remain*, [GAO-06-521](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 7, 2006); GAO, *Elections: Voting Assistance to Military and Overseas Citizens Should Be Improved*, [GAO-01-1026](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2001).

⁵We also reviewed FVAP's Internet voting initiatives, which are no longer relevant because the statute that required DOD to carry out an electronic voting demonstration project was repealed in 2014. See Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, Pub. L. No. 113-291, § 593 (2014) (repealing section 1604 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-107 (2001)).

⁶See H.R. Rep. No. 114-102, at 129-30 (2015) (accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016).

which DOD has (1) identified challenges associated with its military and overseas voting assistance efforts and developed plans to address those challenges, and (2) implemented strategic planning practices to help ensure the long-term effectiveness of FVAP.

For our first objective, we reviewed and analyzed the results of 2008-14 post-election surveys that FVAP conducted with DOD's Defense Manpower Data Center and the Election Assistance Commission, and we reviewed 2014 and 2015 relevant reports resulting from studies that DOD commissioned to identify challenges of its overseas voting program.⁷ We also interviewed relevant DOD and military service officials to discuss the challenges, if any, that FVAP faces in providing voting assistance to servicemembers and other overseas voters. We compared FVAP's plans for addressing the challenges it identified with criteria from Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government, which states that entities should identify actions to remediate challenges on a timely basis.⁸

For our second objective, we reviewed available documentation on DOD's plans for executing FVAP, and compared them with six selected leading practices for federal strategic planning.⁹ These leading practices were identified in our prior work and were informed in part by the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), as updated by the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, associated Office of Management and

⁷RAND Corporation, *The Federal Voting Assistance Program and the Road Ahead: Achieving Institutional Change Through Analysis and Collaboration* (Santa Monica, California: © RAND Corporation, 2015) and Lake Research Partners, *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act Voting: Successes and Challenges* (November 2014). Lake Research Partners was commissioned by DOD to conduct a qualitative study on the successes and challenges of absentee voting.

⁸GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D. C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

⁹GAO, *Environmental Justice: EPA Needs to Take Action Additional Actions to Help Ensure Effective Implementation*, [GAO-12-77](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 6, 2011). In [GAO-12-77](#), we identified and applied these six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning to the Environmental Protection Agency's early efforts to develop a strategic plan for ensuring environmental justice. In that report, we identified the practices in part by reviewing (1) the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, (2) associated Office of Management and Budget guidance; and (3) related leading practices that our past work has identified. We selected these practices for this review because FVAP is in the early stages of developing its new strategic plan and we judged these practices to be the most relevant for evaluating FVAP's strategic planning activities to date.

Budget guidance, and our prior work.¹⁰ Based on the status of FVAP's planning efforts at the time of our review, we selected those practices that are most closely associated with the initial stages of strategic planning. Two analysts independently conducted a content analysis of documents related to DOD's plans for UOCAVA voter assistance to determine the extent to which they exhibited the six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning. The analysts independently rated each of the six leading practices as "exhibited," "partially exhibited," or "did not exhibit" by DOD.¹¹ We compared the two sets of independent observations, discussed how each analyst arrived at the assigned rating, and collectively reconciled any rating differences. In addition to our analyses of DOD's plans, we interviewed relevant DOD, military service officials, and key stakeholders to discuss any efforts related to long-term strategic planning for FVAP's activities. Appendix III provides additional details about our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from June 2015 to April 2016 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

¹⁰We have previously reported that Government Performance and Results Act requirements, even where not directly applicable, can serve as leading practices for strategic planning at lower levels within federal agencies than those to which the act generally applies, such as planning for individual programs or initiatives. See [GAO-12-77](#) and GAO, *Foreign Aid Reform: Comprehensive Strategy, Interagency Coordination, and Operational Improvements Would Bolster Current Efforts*, [GAO-09-192](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 17, 2009), p. 31.

¹¹We determined that DOD "exhibited" a leading practice for federal strategic planning when FVAP's activities explicitly addressed all characteristics set forth in the practice and determined that DOD "partially exhibited" a leading practice when FVAP's activities addressed at least one or more characteristics of the practice but not all characteristics of the practice. Finally, we determined that DOD "did not exhibit" a leading practice when FVAP's activities did not address any characteristics of the practice.

Background

Legislation Protects the Voting Rights of Servicemembers and U.S. Citizens Living Overseas

UOCAVA, as amended, generally protects the right to register and vote by absentee ballot in federal elections for military personnel and U.S. citizens who live overseas.¹² The act also requires that states adopt a number of processes, such as permitting absent servicemembers and overseas voters to use the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot in general elections for federal office, subject to certain exemptions.¹³ In 2002, Congress passed and the President signed the Help America Vote Act of 2002, which amended UOCAVA and required states to be more transparent about sending and rejecting UOCAVA ballots by, for example, requiring states to provide voters the reasons for rejecting a registration application or absentee ballot request and to report the number of ballots sent to servicemembers and overseas voters and the number returned by those voters and cast in the election.¹⁴ Most recently, Congress passed and the President signed the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act in 2009, which amended UOCAVA to require, among other things, that states transmit a validly requested absentee ballot within a certain time frame to absent uniformed services voters or overseas voters and that DOD's FVAP expand its efforts to raise voter awareness regarding voter registration and absentee ballot procedures and resources.¹⁵

Roles and Responsibilities for Providing Assistance to UOCAVA Voters

The U.S. election system for servicemembers and U.S. citizens living overseas comprises a complex network of communication with disparate and geographically disperse populations extending over seven continents, 55 states and territories, and thousands of voting jurisdictions, and relies on the coordinated efforts of federal, state, and local governments to carry out their roles and responsibilities. The Secretary of Defense is the presidential designee with the primary responsibility for the federal functions under UOCAVA, generally including educating and

¹² See generally 52 U.S.C. §§ 20301-20311.

¹³ See §§ 20302(a)(3), 20303(g).

¹⁴ See Pub. L. No. 107-252, §§ 703, 707 (2002) (presently codified at 52 U.S.C. § 20302(c), (d)).

¹⁵ See Pub. L. No. 111-84, §§ 579(a)(1)(C), 583(a)(1) (2009) (presently codified at 52 U.S.C. §§ 20302(a)(8) and 20305).

assisting voters covered by UOCAVA and for working with states to facilitate absentee voting. The Secretary implements UOCAVA and related legislation through DOD's FVAP, which is guided by DOD Instruction 1000.04 and is overseen by the Defense Human Resources Activity within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.¹⁶

FVAP officials stated that the program works to ensure that servicemembers, their eligible family members, and overseas citizens are aware of their right to vote and have the resources to vote successfully from anywhere in the world. To carry out this purpose, FVAP coordinates with DOD components and the Department of State to provide information to, respectively, military personnel who vote absentee and to U.S. citizens who reside abroad. Voter education and assistance efforts for military personnel are largely implemented by the military services through voting assistance officers, who are assigned this role in addition to their primary duties. As of December 2015, DOD officials estimated that the military services collectively had approximately 4,500 unit voting assistance officers. The voting assistance officers distribute and help UOCAVA voters to complete FVAP forms, such as the Federal Post Card Application and the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot, as well as any state or local forms that voters may use to register and request a ballot.¹⁷ See appendixes IV and V for copies of these forms, for which FVAP is generally responsible in accordance with statutory and regulatory requirements. Similarly, the Department of State is responsible for designating a voting action officer to oversee the implementation of its voting assistance program, and designates voting assistance officers at each of its embassies and consulates to provide voting assistance for U.S. citizens living abroad.¹⁸

¹⁶See generally DOD Instruction 1000.04, *Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP)* (Sept. 13, 2012); 32 C.F.R. pt. 233.

¹⁷Voting assistance officers, among other things, promote voter awareness, assist with the completion of registration material, and distribute voting supplies to U.S. servicemembers and their voting-age dependents. DOD Instruction 1000.04 requires that voting assistance officers be assigned at every installation and within each unit of 25 or more permanently assigned members. DODI 1000.04, encl. 4, paras. 2d, 2.f (Sept. 13, 2012).

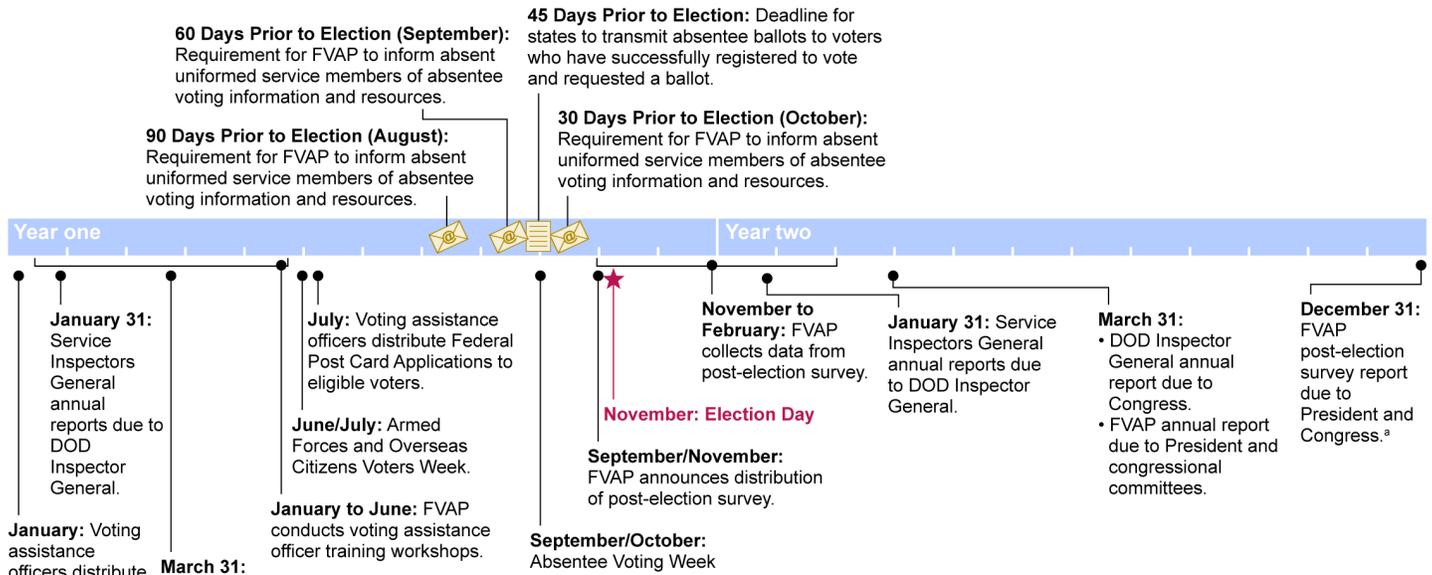
¹⁸See DODI 1000.04, encl. 5, para. 2 c (Sept. 13, 2012); 32 C.F.R. § 233.6(c)(2)(iii). The Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs serves as the department's senior voting representative for civilian overseas voters. See 1 Foreign Affairs Manual 251.1.g (Nov. 18, 2015).

An additional FVAP election cycle responsibility is to survey UOCAVA voters and other stakeholders, such as DOD voting assistance officers and local election officials, and report on FVAP's voter assistance. Specifically, after every presidential election, DOD is required by statute to transmit a report to the President and Congress on the effectiveness of assistance, including a statistical analysis of uniformed services voter participation, a separate statistical analysis of overseas nonmilitary participation, and a description of state-federal cooperation.¹⁹ In addition, DOD is required by statute to transmit a report each year to the President and relevant congressional committees to include an assessment of the effectiveness of voting assistance activities, voter registration and participation by servicemembers and other overseas voters, and, in years following federal election years, information related to absentee ballots.²⁰ Figure 1 provides a general timeline of some of the voting activities that DOD undertakes during federal election cycles.

¹⁹52 U.S.C. § 20301(b)(6) (formerly 42 U.S.C. §§ 1973ff). The report is due not later than at the end of each year after a presidential election year.

²⁰52 U.S.C. § 20308(b) (formerly 42 U.S.C. § 1973ff-4a).

Figure 1: Timeline of Selected DOD Overseas Voting Assistance Activities During Federal Election Cycles



DOD: Department of Defense
 FVAP: Federal Voting Assistance Program

Source: GAO analysis of FVAP information. | GAO-16-378

^aFVAP must transmit a report to the President and Congress not later than the end of each year following presidential election years.

FVAP conducts surveys of UOCAVA voters and state and local election officials, in coordination with the Defense Manpower Data Center and the Election Assistance Commission, respectively, to obtain some of this and related information.²¹ For example, FVAP works with the Defense Manpower Data Center to survey servicemembers about their UOCAVA voting experience.²² The surveys include questions to determine how

²¹DOD guidance indicates that FVAP is responsible for surveying U.S. citizens—including uniformed services, their dependents, and relevant overseas U.S. civilians—as well as voting assistance officers and election officials to gather the necessary statistical information and prepare statutorily required reports. See DODI 1000.04, encl. 3, para. g (Sept. 13, 2012).

²²The Defense Manpower Data Center serves under the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to collate personnel, manpower, training, financial, and other data for the DOD.

voters used DOD and FVAP voting assistance resources and how voters requested, received, and returned their absentee ballots. FVAP also works with the Defense Manpower Data Center to survey DOD's voting assistance officers about the process of delivering voting services to servicemembers. In addition, FVAP collaborates with the Election Assistance Commission.²³ Their partnership began in 2013 in preparation for the 2014 election, in which they conducted a joint survey of state-level election offices about the state's interaction with UOCAVA voters. The local election office survey gathers data about the number of UOCAVA voters that requested and submitted ballots, the methods by which voters requested and submitted ballots, and the rates of and causes for rejected ballots, among other things.²⁴

Multistep Process of the U.S. Absentee Election System

The U.S. election system is decentralized and relies on complex interactions between people, processes, mail, and technology. Voters, local election jurisdictions, states and territories, and the federal government all play roles in the election process. FVAP's role is to share information about this process with its customers—UOCAVA voters—and stakeholders that have roles in other parts of the process. The elections process is primarily the responsibility of the individual states and territories and their local election jurisdictions. Thus, the registration and voting process is a multistep process that varies by state and territory. As we have reported previously, states and territories have considerable discretion in how they organize the elections process, which is reflected in the diversity of procedures and deadlines the states and jurisdictions establish for voter registration and absentee voting.²⁵ Further, states and jurisdictions employ a variety of voting methods, including mailed paper ballots, emails, and faxes.

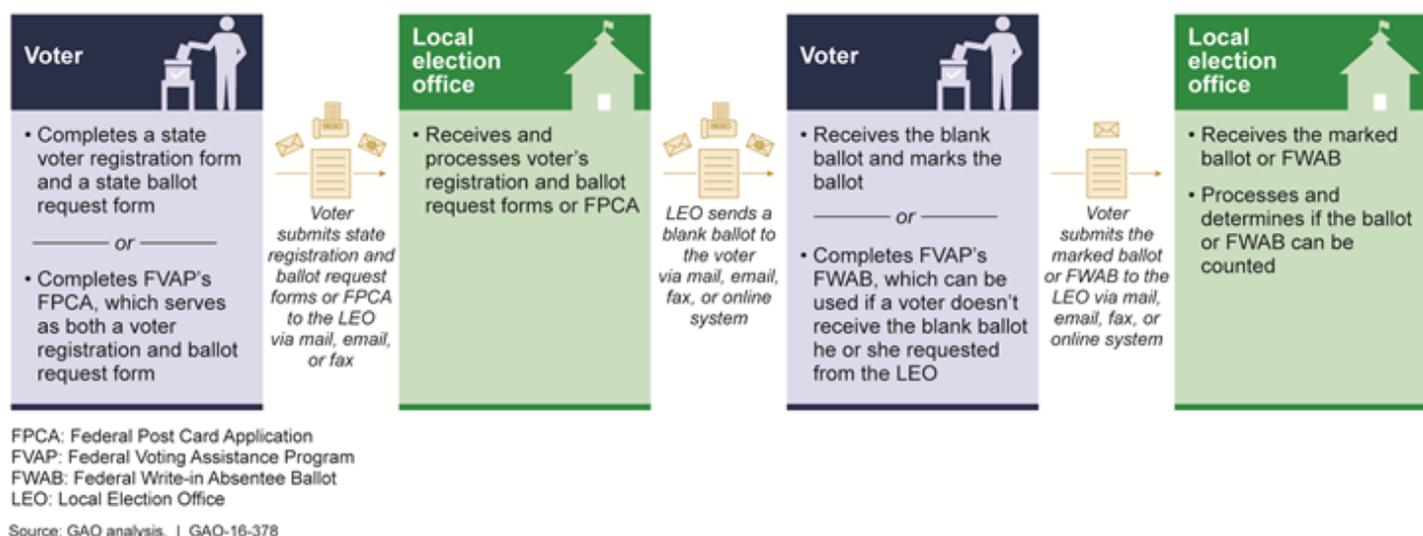
²³The Election Assistance Commission is an independent, bipartisan commission charged with adopting voluntary guidance to meet requirements from the Help America Vote Act of 2002, adopting voluntary voting system guidelines, and serving as a national clearinghouse of information on election administration.

²⁴Under UOCAVA, as amended, after each regularly scheduled general election for federal office, each state and local government unit that administered the election must submit a report to the Election Assistance Commission on the combined number of absentee ballots transmitted to UOCAVA voters and the combined number returned by voters and cast in the election. The report must be made available to the general public. 52 U.S.C. § 20302(c).

²⁵ [GAO-06-521](#).

In order to vote, UOCAVA voters register, obtain and complete an absentee ballot in accordance with state requirements (such as providing a signature), and return the voted ballot to the local election office in time to meet state election deadlines, which also vary. In addition to the time it takes a voter to complete these steps, local election offices must process these materials. Studies have shown that most UOCAVA voters still rely on the mail to request, receive, and return their ballots. Figure 2 depicts the steps of the absentee voting process for military and overseas voters. Following is a description of each step of the multistep absentee voting process in greater detail.

Figure 2: Absentee Voting is a Multistep Process for Military and Overseas Voters



1. Voter Prepares and Submits Voter Registration Application and/or Absentee Ballot Request

The voter prepares and submits a voter registration application and/or absentee ballot request. According to FVAP's voting assistance guide, all states accept voter registration and ballot request forms by mail. UOCAVA voters can choose whether to use the Federal Post Card Application, the registration and absentee ballot request form that FVAP developed and maintains, or their state's voter registration application and state ballot request form. Federal law requires all states to accept the Federal Post Card Application, which is both a voter registration and ballot request form. Some states offer online voter registration and ballot request options directly from their websites. Ballot request options

include, depending on the state, for voters to receive their ballot by mail, email, fax, or other electronic method, if applicable. For some ballot request forms, including the Federal Post Card Application, the voter can select the method by which they would like to receive their ballot from the local election office, including mail, email, or fax.

2. Local Election Office Receives and Processes Voter Registration Application and/or Absentee Ballot Request and Sends Blank Ballot to Voter

The local election office receives and processes the voter registration application and/or absentee ballot request form or Federal Post Card Application and sends the absentee ballot to the voter. Local election offices provide a confirmation notice to voters that their voter registration and absentee ballot requests have been approved, or a letter indicating the reason the request was denied. The Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act amended UOCAVA to require, among other things, that states establish procedures to offer voters the option to receive a ballot electronically.²⁶ Local election offices transmit absentee ballots to voters via email, fax, online download, or by mail, depending on how the voter requested the ballot.

3. Voter Receives, Marks, and Returns the Absentee Ballot

The voter receives, marks, and returns the absentee ballot. According to FVAP's voting assistance guide, all states accept the completed ballot by mail and some states accept completed ballots by email, fax, or an online system. If the voter does not receive the ballot from the local election office or believes the ballot may arrive too late to return the ballot to meet the state deadline, the voter can submit a Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot, a backup ballot that FVAP developed and maintains, in order to meet state deadlines. FVAP makes the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot available to voters on its website and through unit voting assistance officers, who distribute hard copies of the ballot. Federal law requires all states to accept the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot as a backup ballot.²⁷

²⁶See Pub. L. No. 111-84, § 578 (codified at 52 U.S.C. § 20302(a)(7), (f)(1)).

²⁷See 52 U.S.C. §§ 20302(a)(3), 20303(b). Section 20303(g) provides exemptions for states under specified conditions.

4. Local Election Office Receives and Processes the Absentee Ballot

The local election office receives and processes the absentee ballot or Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot. The local election office must determine whether the ballot was received by the deadline and whether the ballot is valid for counting, depending on requirements such as, according to FVAP, the ballot arriving at the local election office on time and the signature on the ballot matching the signature on the voter's registration form, among other requirements. Some states provide a confirmation to voters that their ballot has been received.

DOD Has Identified Long-Standing FVAP Challenges and Needed Actions, but Has Not Established Time Frames for These Actions

DOD has taken various steps to identify challenges and needed improvements to its overseas voting assistance efforts. Specifically, DOD commissioned two studies on FVAP—one issued in 2014 and one in 2015—and administers surveys of absentee voters and voting assistance officers after every federal election. Through these efforts, DOD has identified long-standing issues with the limited awareness of FVAP resources and unpredictable postal delivery of UOCAVA ballots that continue to pose challenges to the program's effectiveness. DOD has identified some actions and has taken some steps to address these challenges such as simplifying and standardizing instructions in FVAP's voting assistance guide to better support UOCAVA voters and their advocates, analyzing quantitative and qualitative research on barriers to voting success, and increasing the usage of online marketing tools to improve outreach. However, these long-standing challenges persist in part because DOD has not established time frames for completing actions intended to address them.

DOD Has Taken Steps to Identify Challenges to Its Voting Assistance Efforts

Since we last reported on FVAP in 2010, DOD has taken various steps to identify challenges and needed improvements to its military and overseas voting assistance efforts. For example, since the 2012 presidential election, DOD has commissioned two studies that identified challenges faced by absentee voters—including active-duty military members, family members of military personnel, overseas federal government employees, and overseas civilian voters—as well as challenges faced by FVAP within its own organization.

Specifically, in 2013, DOD commissioned the RAND Corporation to conduct a study of FVAP's strategic focus in order to assist the program in aligning its strategy and operations to better fulfill its mission and serve its stakeholders.²⁸ According to FVAP officials, the customers of the program are absentee voters, and the program stakeholders include the federal agencies with which it collaborates, state and local election officials that have a role in the absentee voting process, and the voting action officers and military service voting assistance officers.²⁹ The RAND Corporation also identified additional stakeholders, such as congressional staff on relevant committees, organizations that represent state and local election officials such as the National Association of State Election Directors, the National Association of Secretaries of State, the Election Center, as well as nongovernment organizations that represent overseas citizens such as the Overseas Vote Foundation. The study, issued in 2014, found in part that stakeholders did not understand FVAP's purpose and role in the voting process due to: (1) an ambiguous mission that was not commonly understood by program staff, (2) fragmentation among program activities such as assistance and institutional support, (3) inadequate capacity in data collection and analysis, and (4) the inefficient use of staff to carry out program priorities. Based on the results, DOD began taking steps to address these issues, including reexamining FVAP's mission and purpose and implementing changes in how it works with external stakeholders.

In July 2015, DOD released the results of another commissioned study on FVAP in which it identified barriers to UOCAVA voting success and social and behavioral factors that influence voters.³⁰ This study found that building relationships with positions outside of DOD that communicate with overseas voters—such as human resources managers, study abroad leaders, and nongovernmental organizations—could help share information with potential absentee voters. In addition, this study found

²⁸ RAND Corporation, *The Federal Voting Assistance Program and the Road Ahead: Achieving Institutional Change Through Analysis and Collaboration* (Santa Monica, California: © RAND Corporation, 2015).

²⁹ The federal agencies and entities that FVAP collaborates with include the Department of State, the U.S. Postal Service, the Military Postal Service Agency, the Election Assistance Commission, and the Department of Defense—including the military services, the Defense Manpower Data Center, and the Inspector General.

³⁰ Lake Research Partners, *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act Voting: Successes and Challenges* (November 2014).

that DOD needed to share accurate information about the absentee voting process to contradict the myth that absentee ballots are not counted except in rare circumstances.

In addition to these studies, FVAP is required to conduct surveys of voters and voting assistance officers and to provide an assessment of activities undertaken and the effectiveness of assistance.³¹ Using the results of the 2014 survey—the most recent results available—DOD compared UOCAVA registration and voter participation rates for the 2014 general election with the results of prior post-election surveys to better understand dissemination of absentee voting information among the UOCAVA voter population.

These studies and post-election surveys have helped DOD to identify new and emerging issues with its voting assistance program. In particular, two long-standing issues continue to pose challenges to the program's effectiveness. In both of the 2014 and 2015 studies that it issued and in all of the post-election surveys that it administered between 2008 and 2014,³² DOD repeatedly identified that challenges persist with the limited awareness of FVAP's resources and the unpredictable mail delivery of UOCAVA ballots. In addition, both of these issues were discussed in all four reports that we issued on this subject between 2001 and 2010.³³ Further details about these two challenges are provided below.

³¹ See DODI 1000.04, § 4.d (Sept. 13, 2012); *id.*, encl. 3, para. g; 52 U.S.C. §§ 20301(b)(6), 20308(b). In years following general election years, FVAP's annual report is to include a description of the use of absentee ballot collection and delivery procedures, including the number of ballots collected and delivered, the number not delivered by the close of polls, and the reason these ballots were not delivered. See § 20308(b)(3). FVAP's post-election reports include findings from FVAP's post-election surveys, and provide an assessment of activities supporting each general election.

³² After each general election cycle, FVAP is required to report data collected through its post-election surveys, and it reports the results of the post-election surveys to Congress. The post-election reports fulfill the Federal Voting Assistance Program's annual reporting requirement under section 20308(b) of title 52, U.S.C. They include findings from FVAP's post-election surveys and provide an assessment of activities supporting each general election.

³³ [GAO-10-476](#); [GAO-07-774](#); [GAO-06-521](#); and [GAO-01-1026](#).

Limited Awareness of FVAP Resources

According to DOD, efforts to vote by servicemembers and U.S. citizens living overseas are most successful when voters are aware of the tools and resources that are available through FVAP.³⁴ However, as previously noted, the results from recent studies and post-election surveys indicate that there is limited awareness of FVAP's resources among military and overseas voters. For example, FVAP's 2014 post-election survey indicated that, of the active duty servicemembers who responded, 61 percent did not seek voting assistance from FVAP and were not aware of FVAP's assistance, while 60 percent did not seek voting assistance from unit voting assistance officers and were not aware of voting assistance officers. Under DOD guidance implementing UOCAVA, FVAP is responsible for establishing and maintaining a program to assist all eligible voters.³⁵ This involves various activities including, but not limited to, collecting and reporting on survey data, prescribing forms for UOCAVA voters to use when registering to vote, and coordinating with the states. Furthermore, DOD Instruction 1000.04 requires FVAP to establish a means to inform absent uniformed servicemembers of absentee voting information and resources 90, 60, and 30 days before each federal election.³⁶ The types of information military and overseas absentee voters need to be aware of in order to prepare to vote include, but are not limited to:

- election dates and deadlines for submitting an absentee ballot;
- the location where the voter is registered/eligible to vote;
- the way to request a blank ballot;
- FVAP forms and online assistance for completing those forms;
- DOD voting assistance resources available such as the installation or unit voting assistance officer; and
- information on FVAP's resources, such as FVAP's website; call center; and email address.

Consistent with its designated responsibilities, FVAP has developed education and outreach materials such as brochures, wallet cards, a voting assistance guide, and a website to provide information to citizens about the absentee voting process, including state-specific information

³⁴ Federal Voting Assistance Program, *2014 Post-Election Report to Congress*, (June 22, 2015).

³⁵ DODI 1000.04, encl. 3, para. e (Sept. 13, 2012). *See also* 52 U.S.C. §§ 20301-20305.

³⁶ DODI 1000.04, encl. 3, para. j (Sept. 13, 2012).

and service voting assistance programs. In addition, to increase awareness of FVAP as a resource, DOD has hired contractors to support FVAP's voter assistance campaigns through communication and outreach. For example, FVAP's contractors assist FVAP in the development of promotional materials such as videos, posters, and social media messages.

In our 2007 report, we noted that the U.S. election system is highly decentralized and that states and territories have considerable discretion in determining how they organize the election process, which is reflected in the diversity of procedures and deadlines that states and jurisdictions establish for voter registration and absentee voting.³⁷ In its 2008 post-election report to Congress, FVAP similarly highlighted the variation in and complexity of absentee voting procedures. For the 2014 general election, the Election Assistance Commission report summarized 8,200 survey responses from local election offices across the United States and territories about ballots that those offices transmitted to and were returned from UOCAVA voters.³⁸ To help voters and voting assistance officers to be aware of these variations, FVAP maintains a website with links to state election office websites, and regularly updates its Voting Assistance Guide, which includes state-specific instructions and timelines for completing the required voting forms.

Despite such resources, the results of the two DOD-commissioned studies and FVAP's post-election surveys administered between 2008 and 2014 showed that awareness of FVAP materials to assist voters needed improvement. For example, by conducting focus groups and interviews with servicemembers and U.S. citizens living overseas, one of the reports commissioned by DOD found that voters were uncertain about registration deadlines, which, as previously noted, vary by jurisdiction.³⁹ Further, while FVAP offers UOCAVA voters online assistance with completing, among other things, the Federal Post Card Application and the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot online, a DOD-commissioned study found specifically that some military voters interviewed as part of its study

³⁷ [GAO-07-774](#).

³⁸ Election Assistance Commission, *The 2014 EAC Election Administration and Voting Survey Comprehensive Report* (June 2015).

³⁹ Lake Research Partners, *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act Voting: Successes and Challenges* (November 2014).

were not aware of the Federal Post Card Application or that it could be used to both register and request a ballot.⁴⁰ As a result, servicemembers may be taking additional time to separately request a ballot not realizing that they can do so using the same form. Further, that study cited one of the most significant improvements in UOCAVA voting as the states' transmission of blank ballots to UOCAVA voters online through email or a state portal as a result of the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act. Yet as of 2014, many overseas absentee voters interviewed as part of the research study were unaware that they could receive their ballots online.⁴¹

DOD's commissioned reports also found that state and local election offices are not fully aware of FVAP's role as a resource that can assist with implementation of UOCAVA requirements. To raise awareness about FVAP's availability as an election resource to state and local election officials, FVAP assists election officials by providing online training and guidance, sending email alerts, funding research grants, participating in conferences, conducting other local outreach, and making direct (person-to-person) contact. Upon request, FVAP can also help state election officials look up servicemembers' military postal addresses. However, some local election officials and other stakeholders that we spoke with stated that the information that FVAP provides to states may not filter down to the smaller localities. For example, one of the local election officials we spoke with was not aware that FVAP could look up active-duty servicemembers' addresses for election officials. FVAP officials stated that they focus coordination at the state level because, in their experience, some state officials prefer to filter the information that FVAP provides about UOCAVA voting to their localities.

To address state and local awareness of FVAP resources, the Defense Human Resources Activity, on behalf of FVAP, entered into an agreement with the Council of State Governments in 2013. Among other things, the agreement required the creation and support of two advisory groups, one to identify and promote best practices for absentee voting laws, regulations, and policy for military and overseas voters and the second to

⁴⁰Lake Research Partners, *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act Voting: Successes and Challenges* (November 2014).

⁴¹ Lake Research Partners, *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act Voting: Successes and Challenges* (November 2014).

Unpredictable Postal Delivery of Absentee Ballots

standardize data collection and encourage state and local election jurisdictions to test and implement tools to report uniform data from voter registration and election administration systems. The council submits activity reports from this partnership to FVAP on a quarterly, semi-annual, or annual basis depending on the type of report or deliverable, as specified in the agreement. In December 2015, the Council of State Governments released a series of recommendations to the states, based on the results of this collaboration. The recommendations were related to voter communication, the Federal Post Card Application, online voter registration, and engagement with the military community.

The second category of challenges identified by DOD and in our prior work relates to the unpredictable postal delivery of absentee ballots to and from UOCAVA voters. In addition to meeting any documentation requirements, such as providing a signature or appropriately completing all required sections, absentee ballots must be returned to the appropriate election office by the specified deadline in order to have the votes counted. However, the mail system, for a variety of reasons, can be unpredictable for military and overseas voters. Specifically, the time it takes for UOCAVA voters to receive an absentee ballot depends on their location and may involve a complex and lengthy transit via different transportation modes and speeds. For example, officials from the Military Postal Service Agency noted that military mail transits between U.S. Postal Service and Military Postal Service networks, and that voted absentee ballots are shipped from overseas via air carriers. Military mail does not enter a foreign country's mail processing network and is considered domestic mail, according to officials. However, overseas citizens use foreign postal systems and DOD reported that civilians who use those systems expressed distrust for them in certain countries.

In our 2001 report, we noted that overseas voters who do not have access to the military postal system may have faced problems such as longer transit times and unreliable mail service.⁴² Further, we noted that some ballots that originated from overseas may not have been postmarked until they arrived in the United States, raising the potential for local jurisdictions in states with an extended deadline to disqualify them because they lacked an overseas postmark or bore a postmark dated after Election Day. All states provide the option to request or print ballots

⁴²[GAO-01-1026](#).

online, but the availability of resources to active duty military can be limited based on their location. For example, a service voting assistance officer stated that U.S. Navy ships have a limited number of computer terminals, bandwidth, and printers, which may prevent servicemembers from accessing or printing their ballots. Furthermore, mail delays experienced by servicemembers may also be the result of deployment changes including the timing of their arrival at a new duty station or departure from a current duty station. As such, guidance on the different factors that may affect the timeliness of an absentee ballots' transit is critical to help ensure that those voters are optimally positioned to meet U.S. voting deadlines.

In the 2014 general election, postal mail was the primary mode of ballot transmission for many UOCAVA voters. For example, FVAP's 2014 post-election survey report to Congress stated that 61 percent of UOCAVA ballots were transmitted to potential voters via postal mail, and 75 percent of the UOCAVA ballots counted were received via postal mail. For active duty servicemembers, a subset of UOCAVA voters, 75 percent of those who requested a blank ballot obtained it from their local election office through mail delivery from the U.S. Postal Service and the Military Postal Service—which handles military mail—and 84 percent of those members returned their voted ballot through the mail.⁴³ FVAP is required to coordinate with the Military Postal Service Agency (MPSA), an extension of the U.S. Postal Service components which monitors and oversees Military Postal Service functions, to implement measures to ensure voting materials are moved expeditiously, to the maximum extent practicable, by military postal authorities.⁴⁴

To help UOCAVA voters meet the deadline to successfully cast their vote in a U.S. election, U.S. Postal Service, in conjunction with MPSA, provides servicemembers and overseas voters with recommended absentee ballot mailing days and the corresponding dates by which voters should mail their ballot prior to the election date. The MPSA recommends ballot mailing dates for each Army or fleet post office

⁴³ Federal Voting Assistance Program, *2014 Post-Election Report to Congress* (March 2015).

⁴⁴ DODI 1000.04, encl. 3, para. i (Sept. 13, 2012).

location.⁴⁵ According to MPSA officials, the mailing dates are determined by consulting with the major commands and combatant commands and reviewing transportation routes and frequency. These dates provide an estimate of the number of days required for a ballot to reach local election offices through Military Postal Service and U.S. Postal Service networks. In January 2016, the MPSA issued the recommended mail times for the 2016 election, and those times ranged from 7 to 30 days for ballots to be transmitted to local election offices in the United States. Some of the locations with longer transit recommendations include Ethiopia (30 days), Egypt (20 days), and Afghanistan (20 days). In addition, MPSA recommends that all deployed Navy ships in the Atlantic and Pacific fleets mail their ballots at least 25 days before the 2016 election but no later than October 10, 2016.

These recommended mailing times can be helpful to voters; however, based on our analysis, they also indicate that some military and overseas voters who rely solely on mail delivery may not have enough time to both request a blank ballot and cast their vote. For example, we found that voters on deployed Navy ships in the Atlantic and Pacific fleets may experience a 25-day transit time. Therefore, to allow for transit of (1) the Federal Post Card Application that the voter mails to his or her local election office, (2) the blank ballot the local election office sends to the voter, and (3) the voted ballot that the voter mails back to the local election office, a voter would have to multiply the recommended transit time by three to account for each of those transits. Further, if a voter who is deployed in the Atlantic and Pacific fleets relies solely on mail and the local election office sends the blank ballot not later than 45 days prior to the election as required by statute,⁴⁶ it is unlikely that the voted ballot will be returned on time because those two parts of the process may take up to 50 days, according to MPSA's recommended mailing times.

⁴⁵ MPSA officials stated that the recommended absentee ballot mailing dates are calculated based on Express Mail to and from the designated location.

⁴⁶ Under section 20302 of Title 52, U.S. Code, states are required to transmit a validly requested absentee ballot to a voter not later than 45 days before a federal election, if the request is received at least 45 days before the election. 52 U.S.C. § 20302(a)(8)(A). States may seek waivers from the presidential designee in certain circumstances. See § 20302(g). Additionally, in the case in which a request is received fewer than 45 days before a federal election, states are to transmit a ballot in accordance with state law and in a manner that expedites transmission, if practicable and determined appropriate by the state. See § 20302(a)(8)(B).

In addition to recommending mailing dates, MPSA issues a Strategic Postal Voting Action Plan to assist military voters during each general election cycle. This action plan specifies, among other things, deadlines for ballots to be collected and postmarked at overseas military postal outposts. The plan further notes that overseas military postal activities with intermittent transportation networks or other limiting factors may establish alternative mailing deadlines to help ensure that absentee ballots reach election offices by the election date. States reported to the Election Assistance Commission that they had rejected approximately 8,500 of the approximately 146,000 UOCAVA ballots received for the 2014 general election, and that the reason ballots were most commonly rejected is because they were received after a state's ballot receipt deadline.

Military personnel in overseas military postal locations can return their absentee ballots via Express Mail using an Express Mail Label 11-DOD that can be used only for absentee ballots originating from overseas military postal locations. Local election officials we spoke with stated that they send their ballots to the designated military post office via First-Class Mail or Standard Mail because of the expense of sending a ballot via Express Mail. Election officials have the option to use a special identification tag for official ballot First-Class or Standard Mail addressed for domestic or international delivery; however, this is not required.⁴⁷ We previously reported that the U.S. Postal Service changed its delivery standards for some types of mail in 2012 and 2015, which generally increased the number of days to deliver some First-Class Mail in the continental United States.⁴⁸ For copies of the Express Mail Label and the official ballot identification tag, see appendix VI.

⁴⁷ The U.S. Postal Service recommends the use of green Tag 191, to identify domestic and international ballot mail as it provides greater visibility to containers of ballot mail as they move through the U.S. Postal Service processing and distribution operations.

⁴⁸ More information on the changes to postal delivery standards can be found in GAO, *U.S. Postal Service: Actions Needed to Make Delivery Performance Information More Complete, Useful, and Transparent*, [GAO-15-756](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 30, 2015) and GAO, *U.S. Postal Service: Information on Recent Changes to Delivery Standards, Operations, and Performance*, [GAO-14-828R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 27, 2014).

DOD Has Identified Some Actions to Address Long-Standing Challenges, but It Has Not Established Time Frames for Their Completion

DOD has identified some actions and has taken some steps to address challenges associated with the awareness of voter resources provided by FVAP and the unpredictable postal delivery of UOCAVA ballots. However these long-standing challenges persist, in part, because DOD has not established time frames for completing the actions intended to address them. Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government specify that management should complete and document actions, including resolutions of audit findings, to remediate challenges on a timely basis.⁴⁹

To address its finding that the awareness of voter resources provided by FVAP continues to be limited among UOCAVA voters and stakeholders, DOD identified various actions that it will take to resolve the issue through several reports, including its annual reports, and a press release that FVAP issued along with the results of its qualitative study. For example, the actions identified range from targeting its outreach to first-time voters to conducting more comprehensive analyses of the process used by military and overseas voters when voting absentee. Similarly, DOD identified actions that it would take to address the unpredictable delivery of ballots to overseas voters, such as researching technological innovations that could improve mail processing times and assessing the effect of the newly modernized mail redirection system on the number of undeliverable ballots. Table 1 lists the actions that DOD has identified in response to both categories of voter assistance challenges and the report in which each challenge was identified.

Table 1: Actions DOD Has Identified in Response to Long-Standing Voter Assistance Challenges

Long-standing challenge	Actions to address challenge	Source
Awareness of Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) Information and Resources	Increase awareness of FVAP and its purpose, as well as the comprehension of absentee voting forms through direct-to-the voter videos on specific topics including how to use key forms such as the Federal Post Card Application and the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot, tips for a successful voting experience and how to update contact information with election officials.	FVAP post-election survey report, 2014
	Increase usage of online innovative marketing tools to improve outreach to first-time voters.	Lake Research Partners, 2014; FVAP post-election survey report 2014
	Simplify and standardize instructions in the Voting Assistance Guide.	Lake Research Partners, 2014

⁴⁹GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

Long-standing challenge	Actions to address challenge	Source
	Strengthen relationships between FVAP and military commanders and other installation leaders to understand the significance their support makes in the success and quality of service provided by voting assistance officers.	Lake Research Partners, 2014
	Refine marketing and voter awareness campaigns to further stress the use of the Federal Post Card Application with each change of address.	FVAP annual report, 2013; FVAP post-election survey report 2014
	Encourage voting assistance officers to target military family readiness groups.	FVAP post-election survey report 2014
	Analyze quantitative and qualitative research on barriers to voting success to further refine FVAP's survey program.	FVAP post-election survey report 2014
	Consult the Council of State Governments to discuss and develop best practices for instructions provided in ballot packages; ensure local election officials communicate with their Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) voters during all stages of the absentee voting process to solicit address confirmations; standardize and collect data on the individual UOCAVA voter experience; and to gain an improved sense of the root causes for ballot rejections.	Lake Research Partners, 2014; FVAP post-election survey report 2014
	Target direct outreach efforts to the states as opportunities for training on the challenges faced by the UOCAVA voter, share lessons learned, and create a dialogue on how best to improve the overall process from an election administrator's viewpoint.	FVAP post-election survey report 2014
	Research the specific causes of Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot rejections.	FVAP post-election survey report 2012
	Further analyze the effect of electronic blank ballot delivery.	FVAP post-election survey report 2012
Unpredictable postal delivery of UOCAVA ballots	Research technological improvements to improve mail processing through the U.S. Postal Service and the Military Postal Service Agency.	FVAP post-election survey report 2012
	Assess the effect of the newly modernized mail system on the number of undeliverable-as-addressed ballots.	FVAP post-election survey report 2014

Source: GAO Analysis of DOD documents. | GAO-16-378

DOD's identification of actions related to FVAP challenges is a key step to addressing the challenges. However, these long-standing challenges persist in part because DOD has not established time frames for completing the actions intended to address the challenges. The documentation we reviewed on DOD's planned actions did not indicate milestones or completion dates for these actions. DOD officials noted that they establish time frames for election activities in voting action plans, but our review of their most recent 2016 voting action plan contained a list of deadlines related to the election only, and it did not contain time frames for actions to address program challenges. Key management practices call for developing control activities to ensure management's directives are being met, such as clearly defining the time frame associated with projects and tracking whether the projects are meeting their goals.

Specifically, Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government state that control activities should be designed and implemented to ensure that management's directives are achieved and that projects should be tracked so that managers can determine whether they are meeting their goals.⁵⁰ Further, A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge states that project time management includes the processes required to manage the timely completion of the project, such as defining activities, sequencing activities, estimating activity resources, and estimating activity durations.⁵¹

Without establishing time frames for the actions it identified, DOD will lack the necessary processes to manage the timely completion of improvements to its voting assistance activities, which would help the department achieve FVAP's stated goals. Further, given the magnitude and complexity of FVAP's work, establishing time frames would better position DOD to effectively target resources to high-priority initiatives. Finally, time frames would help to provide benchmarks against which DOD can demonstrate FVAP's progress to Congress and other stakeholders, including through the statutorily required annual reporting process. Stakeholder involvement and performance measures for FVAP are discussed in more detail in the next section of this report.

⁵⁰ [GAO-14-704G](#).

⁵¹ Project Management Institute, Inc. *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge. (PMBOK® Guide)*, Fifth Edition, 2013. The Project Management Institute's Guide to Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) provides guidelines for managing individual projects, including developing a project management plan. *PMBOK* is a trademark of Project Management Institute, Inc.

DOD's Implementation of FVAP Exhibits Some Leading Practices of Federal Strategic Planning, but DOD Has Not Developed a Strategy to Help Ensure the Long-Term Effectiveness of the Program

DOD's implementation of its voting assistance program exhibits some characteristics of the six selected leading practices associated with the initial stages of effective federal strategic planning but has not fully exhibited any of these practices. For example, leading practices—such as defining goals, identifying resources, and using performance measures—are only partially exhibited, in part, because DOD largely plans its activities around federal election cycles, during which it focuses on near-term needs, driven by the upcoming election, and federal fiscal year budgeting cycles, according to officials. Furthermore, as of February 2016, DOD does not have a long-term strategy for its voting assistance program, such as a strategic plan, to help ensure the long-term effectiveness of the program.

FVAP Exhibits Some Characteristics of Each Leading Practice of Federal Strategic Planning

During our review, we found that DOD's voting assistance program exhibits some characteristics of each of the six selected leading practices of effective federal strategic planning. Our prior work has identified these leading practices for the initial stages of federal strategic planning, which we derived in part from the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), as updated by the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, associated guidance, and our prior work.⁵² Specifically, these leading practices are to: (1) define the mission and goals, (2) define strategies that address management challenges and identify resources needed to achieve goals, (3) ensure leadership involvement and accountability, (4) involve stakeholders, (5) coordinate with other federal agencies, and (6) develop and use performance measures. Table 2 describes the six selected leading practices and the extent to which they are exhibited in DOD's implementation of FVAP.

⁵² For example, see GAO, *Executive Guide: Effectively Implementing the Government Performance and Results Act*, [GAO/GGD-96-118](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 1, 1996); *Tax Administration: IRS Needs to Further Refine Its Tax Filing Season Performance Measures*, [GAO-03-143](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 22, 2002); *Managing for Results: Strengthening Regulatory Agencies' Performance Management Practices*, GAO-GGD-00-10 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 28, 1999).

Table 2: Six Selected Leading Practices of Federal Strategic Planning and the Extent to Which They Are Exhibited in DOD’s Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP)

Leading practice	Description	Extent exhibited in FVAP
Define the mission and goals	The mission statement should explain why the agency or program exists, what it does, and how. Strategic goals should explain the purpose of the agency or program and the results, including outcomes, it intends to achieve.	●
Define strategies that address management challenges and identify resources needed to achieve goals	Strategies should address management challenges that threaten the program’s ability to meet its long-term strategic goals. Strategies should include a description of the resources needed to meet established goals.	●
Ensure leadership involvement and accountability	Leadership is responsible for ensuring that strategic planning becomes the basis of day-to-day operations. Formal and informal practices should hold managers accountable and create incentives for working to achieve the program’s goals.	●
Involve stakeholders	Agencies should involve stakeholders in developing the mission, goals, and strategies to help ensure they target the highest priorities.	●
Coordinate with other federal agencies	Agencies should coordinate in defining their mission, goals, and strategies to ensure that programs contributing to similar results are mutually reinforcing and efficiently employing federal funds.	●
Develop and use performance measures	Performance measures should allow an agency or program to track the progress it is making toward its mission and goals, provide managers information on which to base their decisions, and create incentives to influence organizational and individual behavior.	●

Legend: Fully Exhibits = ● Partially Exhibits = ● Does Not Exhibit = ○

Source: GAO analysis of DOD data | GAO-16-378.

Below we discuss in more detail our assessment of the extent to which FVAP exhibits the characteristics of each selected leading practice of federal strategic planning.

Define the Mission and Goals

FVAP has recently revised its mission statement, purpose, and strategic goals; however, we rated this leading practice as “partially exhibits” because FVAP has not made them publicly available. Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government state that management should communicate information externally through established reporting lines so that external parties can help the entity achieve its objectives. FVAP officials referred us to FVAP’s website, which states that the purpose of the program is to ensure that servicemembers, their eligible family members, and overseas citizens are aware of their right to vote and have the resources to do so. However, the purpose statement on FVAP’s website does not match the revised mission statement and DOD Instruction 1000.04 does not clearly define the mission of the program, although it identifies the various voting assistance activities and responsibilities throughout DOD. As previously noted, in 2013, DOD

commissioned the RAND Corporation to conduct a study on aligning FVAP's strategy and operations. The results of the study, which DOD and the RAND Corporation released in October 2015, found, among other things, that FVAP lacked a clearly articulated mission, shared among its staff and stakeholders.⁵³ For example, the report noted that FVAP thought UOCAVA voters were best served through intermediaries such as voting assistance officers and local election officials. However, the intermediaries identified did not have a similar understanding of their role and connection to FVAP and voters, and were generally unsure of what FVAP was doing and why.

In anticipation of the report's findings and before the final report was issued, FVAP leaders and staff convened an offsite meeting during the summer of 2015 and proactively developed a new mission statement, vision, and strategic goals. FVAP officials provided us with this new mission statement, purpose, and associated strategic goals during our review, but as of January 2016 these new statements had not been made publicly available. According to FVAP officials, the new mission and strategic goals are part of a forthcoming strategic plan, and they do not plan to make them publicly available until after November 2016 to avoid distraction prior to the upcoming presidential election. However, without communicating its updated mission, vision, and strategic goals publicly, FVAP stakeholders may continue to be unclear about FVAP's purpose and their role in its achievement. In addition, without a consistent understanding between program staff and stakeholders about FVAP's role, potential UOCAVA voters may not receive information that is needed to help maximize their opportunity to vote in the upcoming 2016 presidential election.

We also found that FVAP has not maintained consistent strategic goals for its program. In November 2015, a senior FVAP official told us that FVAP has three broad strategic goals that will help it achieve its mission: (1) reducing obstacles to voting, (2) educating and making voters aware of the voting process, and (3) being a highly valued customer service organization. We reviewed FVAP's fiscal year 2014-2016 budget justification documents, which contain FVAP's strategic goals and corresponding performance measures and found that FVAP has changed

⁵³ RAND Corporation, *The Federal Voting Assistance Program and the Road Ahead: Achieving Institutional Change Through Analysis and Collaboration* (Santa Monica, California: © RAND Corporation, 2015).

its strategic goals in fiscal years 2014 and 2015, and changed the performance measures associated with the strategic goals from year to year. In addition, the mission and strategic goals are different than the purpose statement that FVAP shares publicly on its website. Although the changes in FVAP's strategic goals are not substantial, the frequency with which they have changed, coupled with the fact that FVAP does not share its goals publicly, inhibits FVAP's ability to track and demonstrate progress over time. Table 3 shows how FVAP's strategic goals have changed.

Table 3: Strategic Goals of DOD's Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) for Fiscal Years 2014 through 2016

Fiscal year 2014 strategic goals	Fiscal year 2015 and 2016 strategic goals	FVAP Purpose 2016
Improving success rates of Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) voters to meet or exceed the general absentee population's voter success rates by 2016	Reducing obstacles to military and overseas voting success	Assist uniformed services and overseas voters to exercise their right to vote so that they have an equal opportunity with the general population to have their vote counted.
Providing all UOCAVA voters adequate opportunity to successfully cast their ballot in every state and territory in the 2016 general election	Being a highly valued customer service program to military and overseas voters and election officials	Assist the states in complying with relevant federal laws by providing current information
Streamlining the UOCAVA voting process by 2016	Expanding UOCAVA voter awareness and outreach initiatives for all populations	Advocate on behalf of the uniformed services and overseas voters, identifying impediments to their ability to exercise their right to vote, and proposing methods to overcome those impediments.

Source: GAO analysis of FVAP information. | GAO 16 378

Further, FVAP has not consistently publicized the aforementioned strategic goals on, for example, its website or in its annual reports to Congress, where they could be made available for FVAP's customers and stakeholders. Without consistent, publicly available strategic goals and their intended results, FVAP cannot effectively demonstrate to essential stakeholders and potential voters how its efforts are helping to achieve progress toward its goals.

Define Strategies That Address Management Challenges and Identify Resources Needed to Achieve Goals

DOD has identified some challenges faced by FVAP related to voter awareness. As a result, we rated this leading practice as "partially exhibits." In our work on performance management, we have previously reported that it is particularly important that agencies develop strategies that address management challenges, outside of their control, that

threaten their ability to meet long-term strategic goals.⁵⁴ During our review, officials acknowledged that FVAP faces challenges beyond its control, especially related to military and overseas citizens' interest in voting. To make decisions about populations on which to concentrate voter awareness activities, DOD used the results of post-election surveys to group individuals based on how likely they are to vote. For example, FVAP's post-election surveys suggest that servicemembers with spouses vote at consistently higher rates than those who are unmarried. DOD officials told us that a significant portion of the program's budget—approximately \$1.2 million of a total \$3.5 million to \$4 million annually—is used to fund FVAP's voter awareness campaign, and that the information obtained from post-election surveys will enable FVAP to more effectively target the distribution of outreach materials based on the unique characteristics of each group. However, DOD has not taken similar steps to define strategies or devote resources to address challenges that FVAP has identified related to unpredictable mail processing and its potential impact on the timely transmission of ballots between voters and local election offices. Without identifying strategies and resources needed to address all of FVAP's identified challenges, FVAP cannot ensure the program's ability to meet its long-term strategic goals.

Ensure Leadership
Involvement and Accountability

FVAP's current Director, whom DOD designated in November 2013,⁵⁵ has demonstrated involvement in the program; however, we rated this leading practice as "partially exhibits" because DOD has not established and institutionalized mechanisms to help ensure the accountability of the FVAP Director in achieving program goals. Leading practices suggest that a program's leadership is responsible for ensuring that strategic planning becomes the basis for day-to-day operations and that formal and informal practices hold managers accountable and create incentives for working to achieve the agency's goals. Prior to the current Director, FVAP was led by four different Directors from 2008 through 2013, and, according to DOD officials, these leadership transitions were routinely accompanied by changes in program priorities. FVAP's current Director has demonstrated involvement in the program by taking initial steps to identify issues that may pose challenges to DOD's voting assistance

⁵⁴GAO, *Managing for Results: Critical Issues for Improving Federal Agencies' Strategic Plans*, (Washington, DC.: Sept. 16, 1997).

⁵⁵FVAP's current Director served as the Acting Director from January 14, 2013, until his selection as permanent Director in November 2013.

efforts and to develop a strategic plan. For example, the Director initiated and included program staff in a 3-year study that FVAP commissioned the RAND Corporation to conduct on FVAP. The study found that FVAP staff could not reach consensus about the program's purpose and its role in the voting community. In response to these results, the Director led staff in the development of the new mission, vision, and purpose statements previously discussed, as well as in the revision of strategic goals for DOD's voting assistance program.

With regard to leadership accountability, FVAP's Director provides a weekly report on program activities to the Acting Director of the Defense Human Resources Activity, which includes information about media inquiries, inquiries from Congress, and high-profile meetings, among other activities. In addition, the Defense Human Resources Activity tracks FVAP's budget execution and procurement actions throughout the fiscal year. While the Defense Human Resources Activity requires its programs to submit a mission, goals, and performance measures as part of the budget justification according to a senior official, the official told us that the Defense Human Resources Activity uses that information to identify resource needs only, and not to measure FVAP's progress toward goals. Further, the official stated that Defense Human Resources Activity does not use formal mechanisms, such as a strategic plan, to hold FVAP or any of its other programs accountable for the achievement of program goals. Without accountability mechanisms, DOD will have a limited ability to maximize the current and future Director's ownership of and focus on FVAP's mission and progress.

Involve Stakeholders

DOD coordinates extensively with some of the stakeholders involved in its voting assistance efforts; however, we rated this leading practice as "partially exhibits" because it has not fully involved all of its stakeholders in the development of FVAP's mission, goals, and strategies. For example, FVAP involved its stakeholders in the studies it commissioned to identify internal and external challenges, and those studies incorporated the stakeholder perspectives into their findings. However, FVAP did not fully involve stakeholders in the development of its mission and goals. Involving stakeholders in developing a program's mission, goals, and strategies is important to help ensure that they target the highest priorities, as specified in the leading practices for federal strategic planning. UOCAVA voting is a complex process that involves multiple stakeholders, and DOD officials told us that there are several key stakeholders with whom they routinely communicate.

In addition, FVAP and the stakeholders provided a number of examples of coordination and information sharing, such as a monthly teleconference that FVAP holds with voting action officers from all the services to make announcements, share information, and discuss issues related to its voting assistance efforts. In addition, FVAP shares information related to voting assistance with stakeholders on its website, by developing voting awareness materials and public service announcements.

FVAP also works with local election offices to facilitate absentee voting under UOCAVA and to help ensure mutual understanding of state-specific absentee voting procedures, in accordance with the DOD instruction.⁵⁶ DOD officials also told us that they routinely communicate FVAP-related information to the states via the Council of State Governments. Specifically, in 2013 the Defense Human Resources Activity entered into a cooperative agreement with the Council of State Governments to establish two working groups to advise FVAP—one focused on best practices for absentee voting laws, regulations, and policy for absent uniformed service and overseas voters and the other focused on election technology initiatives. These working groups comprise state and local election officials including secretaries of state, election directors, and voter registrar positions, and in December 2015, developed recommendations to the states to improve the absentee voting process for UOCAVA voters.

However, DOD officials also noted that their interactions with other FVAP stakeholders typically occur on an as-needed basis. For example, DOD officials told us that FVAP representatives attend conferences held by state organizations and state and local election officials to share information on UOCAVA voting. We spoke with local election officials in two districts and other stakeholders who similarly told us that FVAP does not involve them directly in its activities; rather, states communicate information—at their discretion—from FVAP to local election offices. As a result, local election officials may not receive FVAP-related information on a consistent basis if it is not shared by state election officials. Further, the October 2015 RAND Corporation report stated that some stakeholders

⁵⁶Among other things, DODI 1000.04 requires FVAP to obtain from each state current voter registration and absentee voting information, as well as to establish and maintain contact with state and local officials to improve the absentee voting process for UOCAVA voters. DODI 1000.04, encl. 3, paras. c, d (Sept. 13, 2012).

did not clearly understand FVAP's role and others felt that stakeholder engagement was largely driven by the agendas of agency officials rather than by the agency's mission.⁵⁷ Without involving all of its stakeholders in developing FVAP's mission, goals, and strategies, program officials cannot ensure that they are optimally targeting the highest priorities for improving voting assistance activities.

Coordinate with Other Federal Agencies and Entities

FVAP coordinates with related federal agencies and entities, including the uniformed services and the Coast Guard, the Election Assistance Commission, the Department of State, and MPSA to help ensure that agencies with a role in the absentee voting process are working toward similar results; however, we rated this leading practice as "partially exhibits" because, while DOD coordinates with these federal entities to provide voting assistance, FVAP has not involved its federal partners in the development of its mission and goals. A senior FVAP official stated that FVAP staff developed only the program's mission and goals, although the program worked with stakeholders to identify absentee voting challenges, as previously discussed. FVAP carries out its coordination with these agencies and state election officials in accordance with DOD Instruction 1000.04. For example, the instruction requires FVAP, in coordination with the military services, to develop training materials for installation voting assistance offices, unit voting assistance officers, and recruiters to provide voter registration and absentee ballot assistance.⁵⁸ FVAP develops these training materials, which include a description of the absentee voting process and the resources available to assist that process, and provides them on its website. FVAP also provides in-person training workshops on installations worldwide. In addition, FVAP holds monthly teleconferences with the service voting action officers—who are responsible for voting assistance operations within their service—in which they discuss issues and plans related to voting assistance.

A senior FVAP official provided examples of FVAP's coordination with the Department of State to leverage data on the overseas citizen population, to quantify the population and identify areas where overseas citizens are

⁵⁷ RAND Corporation, *The Federal Voting Assistance Program and the Road Ahead: Achieving Institutional Change Through Analysis and Collaboration* (Santa Monica, California: © RAND Corporation, 2015).

⁵⁸DODI 1000.04, encl. 3, para. p (Sept. 13, 2012).

concentrated. Specifically, the Department of State provides FVAP avenues to reach overseas citizens with voting process awareness messaging, through their in-country U.S. citizen registration process, Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, embassies, consulates, and warden networks. The official further stated that FVAP considered partnering with other federal agencies that maintain information on overseas citizens, such as the Internal Revenue Service and the Social Security Administration, but did not pursue it due to the sensitive nature of the data those agencies maintain.

UOCAVA requires FVAP to coordinate with the Election Assistance Commission and chief state election officials to develop standards for the states to report data on the numbers of ballots transmitted and received during a general election.⁵⁹ To carry out this requirement, FVAP partnered with the Election Assistance Commission in 2014 to combine existing surveys for local election offices to report the number of UOCAVA voters who requested and submitted ballots, the methods by which UOCAVA voters requested and submitted ballots, and the rates of and causes for rejected ballots, among other relevant issues. This partnership allows both FVAP and Election Assistance Commission to meet statutory reporting requirements while eliminating duplicate requests for local election officials to provide election data.

Develop and Use Performance Measures

DOD collects data for three sets of metrics that are intended to evaluate DOD's voting assistance; however, we rated this leading practice as "partially exhibits" because, according to a senior DOD official, none of these sets of metrics are used to evaluate FVAP's performance toward the program's strategic goals. The performance measures identified by FVAP include:

- Measures of Effect and Performance: DOD Instruction 1000.04 requires FVAP to prescribe metrics for the DOD components and services to use to evaluate their individual voting assistance programs and, to the extent practicable, establish and maintain an online portal to collect and consolidate program metrics.⁶⁰ FVAP developed its Measures of Effect & Performance initially in 2011, and updated those

⁵⁹ See 52 U.S.C. §§ 20301(b)(11), 20302(c); see also DODI 1000.04, encl. 3, para. k (Sept. 13, 2012).

⁶⁰ See DODI 1000.04, encl. 3, para. m (Sept. 13, 2012).

measures in October 2014. These measures are intended for the service voting assistance officers to track the assistance they provide, and include counts of the number and types of personnel assisted, the methods of assistance, and the number of forms distributed. A senior FVAP official told us that FVAP uses these metrics to monitor activities and make real-time resource decisions, but did not plan to use these metrics to assess FVAP's performance toward meeting program goals.

In addition to developing and prescribing that the military departments collect these metrics,⁶¹ FVAP developed a portal for the military services to record their program metrics. Under DOD's guidance, installation and unit-level voting assistance officers in each service are encouraged to collect and record information about the voting assistance they provide on a quarterly basis. These metrics are not linked to FVAP's strategic goals and are not evaluative. In addition, one voting action officer noted that the measures are not reflective of voting assistance activities. Rather, the measures are tallies that record the number and types of actions taken by voting assistance officers.

In 2010, we identified similar limitations in a previous version of FVAP's Measures of Effect and Performance, including reliability concerns and concerns that the measures were credible to evaluate only some of FVAP's efforts.⁶² In 2013, the DOD Inspector General also reported that FVAP had not applied clearly defined voting assistance program goals and metrics to enable program officials to evaluate program performance and effectiveness, and that the focus of FVAP's metrics was limited to measuring the level of activity.⁶³ However, in 2015 the DOD Inspector General reported that FVAP had begun tracking the measures of effect and performance on January 1, 2015, and that those measures were designed to provide FVAP with a more accurate representation of the resources utilized for voting

⁶¹ Defense Human Resources Activity, Federal Voting Assistance Program, *Memorandum for Senior Service Voting Representatives of the Military Departments: Voting Assistance Program Metrics* (Oct. 15, 2014).

⁶² [GAO-10-476](#).

⁶³ U.S. Department of Defense, Inspector General, *Assessment of Voting Assistance Programs for Calendar Year 2012* (Alexandria, VA: Apr. 29, 2013).

assistance and would help to determine the level and type of assistance that is being sought by servicemembers.⁶⁴

- **Budget Estimate Performance Measures:** FVAP identifies strategic goals and related performance measures in its annual budget justification submission for the Defense Human Resources Activity Operation and Maintenance budget estimates. FVAP's submission includes performance measures because the Defense Human Resources Activity requires that they be included in budget estimates, according to an official. As previously stated, our review of FVAP's budget estimates for fiscal years 2014-16 indicates that FVAP has changed its strategic goals and the associated performance measures, thus preventing FVAP from assessing or demonstrating its performance over time. In addition, a senior FVAP official told us that these performance measures are aligned with short-term goals that change from year to year based on factors such as the election cycle and program initiatives. One senior-level FVAP official told us that the performance measures listed in the budget estimates do not communicate a full picture of all of the program activities that FVAP is undertaking and thus FVAP does not regularly use them to evaluate the program; rather, the performance metrics are used mostly to meet the information requirements of FVAP's budget requests. Further, an official from the Defense Human Resource Activity noted that while the office asks the programs for which it has oversight (including FVAP) to identify their performance measures as a budget exhibit, it does not require the programs to demonstrate how the performance measures are used to evaluate progress.
- **Call Center Metrics:** FVAP maintains a call center for UOCAVA voters and FVAP stakeholders to submit questions, via phone, fax, email, or FVAP's website, about all aspects of absentee voting. Once a service that FVAP contracted out to a third party, FVAP officials noted that they recently brought the call center back in house and knowledgeable FVAP staff now manage the center and respond to questions. In addition, FVAP maintains a portal with metrics describing the assistance it provides through the call center. Like the measures of effect and performance, the call center metrics are tallies of the number of inquiries, broken down by method of inquiry, type of caller (military, overseas citizen, local election official, or other), and

⁶⁴U.S. Department of Defense, Inspector General, *Assessment of Voting Assistance Programs for Calendar Year 2014* (Alexandria, VA.: Mar. 31, 2015).

the nature of the inquiry. Further, the call center metrics include feedback from the caller about satisfaction with the assistance provided. While the call center metrics are initial steps to help FVAP demonstrate how it provides assistance and identify challenges that callers are facing, these metrics do not allow FVAP to track the progress it is making toward its mission and all three of its strategic goals

While these three mechanisms help FVAP collect data that enables program officials to monitor voting assistance activities, the data do not measure how well these activities make progress toward FVAP's goals of (1) reducing obstacles to voting, (2) being a highly valued customer service organization, and (3) educating and making voters aware of the voting process. Without establishing performance measures and using the information that those measures are intended to collect, FVAP cannot track the progress it is making toward its goals to inform decision making or demonstrate progress to its staff, DOD, and stakeholders.

FVAP Has Not Developed a Long-Term Strategy to Guide Its Voting Assistance Efforts

According to officials, as of February 2016, FVAP did not have a long-term strategy, such as a strategic plan, to institutionalize ongoing practices and establish accountability for efforts still being developed, such as the partially exhibited leading practices that we have identified above. Instead, FVAP plans its activities in the near-term around federal election cycles, and links its activities to statutory requirements and some challenges that it has identified.⁶⁵

FVAP's most recent strategic plan was published in 2010, but a senior FVAP official told us they stopped using the plan in 2012. FVAP officials also told us that they do not have a current strategic plan because there has been frequent turnover in the program director position, and that the transitions in leadership were often accompanied by changes in priorities. As a result, FVAP operated without a strategic plan to guide its overseas voting assistance efforts throughout the 2012 and 2014 general election cycles. According to a DOD official and as evidenced in its annual reports to Congress, FVAP is accustomed to cyclical planning, by identifying lessons learned about overseas absentee voting following each federal election and applying those lessons to the next election cycle.

⁶⁵[GAO-12-77](#).

Instead of updating their previous strategic plan, FVAP's senior officials told us that they are in the process of developing a new strategic plan that they expect to finalize internally among FVAP staff in the summer of 2016. However, these officials further stated that they do not plan to publish the strategic plan until after November 2016 so as to avoid any distraction from FVAP's voter assistance responsibilities prior to and during the upcoming presidential election. While FVAP officials provided a timeline for some steps they will take to develop a new strategic plan, they did not have documentation of a draft strategic plan because they said it was early in the development phase. Without a strategic plan that institutionalizes a long-term vision, it will be difficult for FVAP to demonstrate progress in addressing its long-standing challenges, such as those previously discussed. Furthermore, a strategic plan would help to incorporate all of the leading practices of federal strategic planning that can help to ensure that FVAP has a defined and sustainable path through the dynamic voting environment and any future transitions in leadership.

Conclusions

Since our first report on FVAP in 2001, DOD has taken steps to improve its assistance to servicemembers and overseas voters. For example, DOD has proactively commissioned studies that identified challenges with FVAP and it has administered and analyzed the results of post-election surveys to identify areas needing improvement. While these are positive steps, some of the challenges identified, such as the limited voter and stakeholder awareness of FVAP resources and the unpredictable postal delivery of absentee ballots, are long-standing issues and continue to persist—in part because DOD has not established time frames for completing identified corrective actions. Having time frames would help DOD to better focus its effort and resources and would provide important benchmarks against which DOD could demonstrate program progress to Congress and other stakeholders, including through the statutorily required annual reports. Further, while DOD's leadership of FVAP has stabilized since 2013, DOD has not fully implemented the six selected leading practices for federal strategic planning into the day-to-day operation of the program. In addition, DOD has not developed a long-term strategy that could help focus the program and further develop and institutionalize the leading practices that it partially exhibits through future leadership transitions, so it can effectively respond to the changing nature of the voting environment.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making three recommendations to improve DOD's management of FVAP.

We recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to establish time frames to complete actions that its Federal Voting Assistance Program has identified it will take to address challenges, and also to use these time frames to demonstrate progress for stakeholders, including through its statutorily required annual reporting.

We recommend that the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, through the Defense Human Resources Activity, direct FVAP's Director to fully implement the six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning into the day-to-day operations of the program.

We recommend that the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, through the Defense Human Resources Activity, direct FVAP's Director to complete the development of a strategic plan that fully exhibits the six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning, including, but not limited to:

- a statement of FVAP's revised mission and goals;
- an identification of strategies that address management challenges and resources needed to achieve goals;
- a description of leadership involvement and accountability;
- a description of stakeholder involvement in the development of FVAP priorities;
- a coordination strategy to communicate the program's mission and goals to other federal agencies; and
- a description of performance measures, aligned with program goals that FVAP will use to track progress toward achieving goals.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

In commenting on a draft of this report, DOD partially concurred with one of our three recommendations, and concurred with the other two recommendations. DOD's comments are reprinted in appendix VII. DOD, the U.S. Postal Service, and the MPSA also provided technical comments, which we incorporated, as appropriate.

In partially concurring with our first recommendation that the Secretary of Defense direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to establish time frames to complete actions that FVAP has identified that it will take to address challenges, and to use these time

frames to demonstrate progress for stakeholders, DOD agreed that time frames can provide a “yard stick” for measuring program effectiveness. However, DOD stated that it had not specified time frames because recommendations in FVAP’s reports to Congress are taken for immediate action and election cycles provide a natural timeframe for completion. DOD further highlighted a number of efforts that are complete or underway for the 2016 election cycle and that it plans to include in its next report to Congress.

As stated in our report, we recognize that FVAP is accustomed to a cyclical planning process that is largely driven by the 2-year timeframe of the federal election schedule. In addition, we note in our report steps that have been taken to address long-standing challenges such as increasing voter awareness of FVAP resources and mitigating unpredictability in postal delivery. However, these long-standing challenges persist in part because DOD has not established time frames for completing actions intended to address them, as discussed in our report. We believe that, if time frames are not established with the specificity needed to help ensure that actions are completed in a timely manner for implementation into the next election cycle, actions may not be properly prioritized, resources may not be effectively targeted; and decision makers and stakeholders may not have necessary information regarding FVAP’s progress with respect to improvements.

In concurring with our second recommendation that the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, through the Defense Human Resources Activity, direct FVAP’s Director to fully implement the six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning into the day-to-day operations of the program, DOD stated that its formal efforts to implement selected leading strategic planning practices began in 2015 when the RAND Corporation assessed FVAP’s organizational structure and FVAP took initial steps to position itself as a customer-focused service delivery organization. We agree that FVAP’s strategic planning activities began during the review by the RAND Corporation, and in our report note FVAP’s efforts to revise the mission and strategic goals through a staff offsite after initial feedback from the RAND Corporation.

In addition, DOD highlighted the following steps it has taken to incorporate the characteristics of strategic planning leading practices that our analysis identified as missing, and provided examples that demonstrate progress in some of these areas.

-
1. **Define the mission and goals:** DOD noted that FVAP will make the complete strategic plan publicly available in December 2016. We agree that this is a positive step, and note in our report FVAP's plan to issue a strategic plan after November 2016 because FVAP wanted to avoid distraction prior to the upcoming presidential election.
 2. **Define strategies that address management challenges and identify resources needed to achieve goals:** DOD stated that most factors that influence the success of a voter are outside the influence or control of DOD. Further, DOD stated that FVAP works to facilitate the voting process and improve areas where it has the ability to affect the process. While we agree that DOD does not control many of the factors that influence the success of a voter to cast a ballot, we note in our report that it is particularly important that agencies specifically develop strategies to address those management challenges that are outside of their control. We believe that, by identifying the challenges that are outside of its control, FVAP can also identify a reasonable level of resources to devote to address certain challenges, or determine how to leverage partnerships with the stakeholders that have more direct control on absentee voting such as states, the voters, and the MPSA.
 3. **Ensure leadership involvement and accountability:** DOD noted that it has a well-established chain of command in carrying out its responsibilities under UOCAVA and those lines of accountability are articulated in a relevant directive and instruction. We disagree with DOD's implication that the guidance alone ensures leadership involvement and accountability, and have concerns that the strategic planning activities initiated by the current Director could be diminished by a future leadership transition. Officials noted during our review that leadership transitions were routinely accompanied by changes in program priorities.
 4. **Involve stakeholders:** DOD noted that stakeholder involvement was part of the RAND Corporation's study, during which stakeholder views of FVAP responsibilities were solicited. Further, DOD stated that some of the stakeholder misconceptions about FVAP's role were based on previous communication from FVAP. In our report, we note the involvement of FVAP's stakeholders in the RAND Corporation study and continue to believe that a strategic plan could help FVAP communicate its role consistently and publicly to its stakeholders, to address the misconceptions, such as the perception that FVAP stakeholder coordination was driven by individual agendas, which the RAND study uncovered.

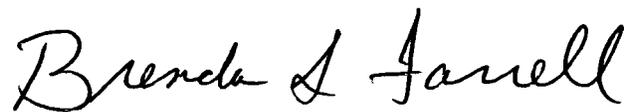
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5. **Coordinate with other federal agencies:** DOD stated that it coordinated with other federal agencies, which were also included in the RAND study, in the development of its mission, goals, and strategies. These efforts led to the newly defined and focused strategic goals. We do not have evidence from the stakeholders we spoke with, listed in appendix III, that the RAND Corporation or FVAP consulted them specifically regarding the development of FVAP's mission, goals, and strategies.
 6. **Develop and use performance measures:** DOD stated that FVAP and each of its employees are evaluated by yearly performance measures tied to the work conducted on a daily basis. We disagree that annual performance evaluations for individual staff constitute performance measures that help FVAP measure progress toward achieving its strategic goals, even when these performance measures are tracked, as DOD suggests, upward from the individual to the FVAP office, the Defense Human Resources Activity, the Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness), and overall DOD strategies and goals. In addition, DOD noted that FVAP will refine its analysis of metrics collected by service voting assistance officers and compare the numeric values collected with historical values over time. However, the metrics we reviewed were a tally of numbers associated with a type of assistance or service provided. Those metrics did not contain a baseline to indicate how such assistance efforts compared with assistance needed or with the size of the UOCAVA voter population.

In concurring with our third recommendation to complete the development of a strategic plan that fully exhibits the six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning, DOD stated that FVAP embraces GAO's six selected leading practices of strategic planning, and that, as noted earlier, it will publicly issue a final strategic plan in December 2016. While FVAP's identification of a time frame for issuing its strategic plan demonstrates progress, it also indicates that FVAP will not have a plan to guide its work through another presidential election. We noted in our report that the program did not have a strategic plan during the 2012 and 2014 general election cycles. Further, in its comments, DOD took issue with our statement that the lack of a strategic plan has hindered FVAP's ability to respond to challenges faced in the military and overseas citizen voting environment. We disagree and continue to believe that, as discussed in our report, it will be difficult for FVAP to demonstrate progress in addressing its long-standing challenges without a strategic plan. Further, we continue to believe that a publicly available strategic plan will help FVAP communicate its role to stakeholders and customers, clearly state

its program goals, and identify the metrics that FVAP will use to measure progress toward its goals and to mitigate challenges.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees; the Secretary of Defense; the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Secretaries of the military departments, and the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps. This report is also available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix VIII.



Brenda S. Farrell
Director
Defense Capabilities and Management

List of Addressees

The Honorable John McCain
Chairman
The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Mac Thornberry
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jason Chaffetz
Chairman
The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
House of Representatives

The Honorable Justin Amash
House of Representatives

The Honorable Rod Blum
House of Representatives

The Honorable Brendan F. Boyle
House of Representatives

The Honorable Ken Buck
House of Representatives

The Honorable Buddy Carter
House of Representatives

The Honorable Matt Cartwright
House of Representatives

The Honorable William Lacy Clay
House of Representatives

The Honorable Bonnie Watson Coleman
House of Representatives

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jim Cooper
House of Representatives

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
House of Representatives

The Honorable Mark Desaulnier
House of Representatives

The Honorable Scott DesJarlais
House of Representatives

The Honorable Tammy Duckworth
House of Representatives

The Honorable John Duncan
House of Representatives

The Honorable Blake Farenthold
House of Representatives

The Honorable Paul Gosar
House of Representatives

The Honorable Trey Gowdy
House of Representatives

The Honorable Michelle Grisham
House of Representatives

The Honorable Glenn Grothman
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jody Hice
House of Representatives

The Honorable William Hurd
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jim Jordan
House of Representatives

The Honorable Robin Kelly
House of Representatives

The Honorable Brenda Lawrence
House of Representatives

The Honorable Ted Lieu
House of Representatives

The Honorable Cynthia Lummis
House of Representatives

The Honorable Stephen Lynch
House of Representatives

The Honorable Carolyn Maloney
House of Representatives

The Honorable Thomas Massie
House of Representatives

The Honorable Mark Meadows
House of Representatives

The Honorable John Mica
House of Representatives

The Honorable Mick Mulvaney
House of Representatives

The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton
House of Representatives

The Honorable Gary J. Palmer
House of Representatives

The Honorable Stacey E. Plaskett
House of Representatives

The Honorable Steve Russell
House of Representatives

The Honorable Michael Turner
House of Representatives

The Honorable Tim Walberg
House of Representatives

The Honorable Mark Walker
House of Representatives

The Honorable Peter Welch
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Description of Military and Overseas Ballots in Elections Held in 2008 through 2014

We reviewed 2008-14 general election survey data from the Election Assistance Commission, which show that the turnout of voters covered under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act has fluctuated between the mid-term and presidential elections, and that states have received a higher number of ballots from voters covered by the Act during presidential elections. In table 4 we show that, of the ballots that local election offices received, counted, and rejected during each election, the state-provided absentee ballots were the most common in each category.¹ Further, the usage of Federal Write-in Absentee Ballots, FVAP's write-in backup ballot for eligible UOCAVA voters who have not received their requested ballots at least 30 days before federal elections, increased between the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. Specifically, local election offices received, counted, and rejected Federal Write-in Absentee Ballots at higher rates in the 2012 presidential election than the 2008 presidential election. The Election Assistance Commission reported that local election offices rejected absentee ballots primarily because they had received those ballots after the deadline in each election. Local election offices also rejected ballots for other reasons, such as because a voter's name or address did not match that voter's registration or because local election offices did not have an absentee ballot registration on file.

Table 4: Military and Overseas Ballots Received, Counted, and Rejected in Elections Held in 2008 through 2014

	2014 Mid-term election	2012 Presidential election	2010 Mid-term election	2008 Presidential election
Total absentee ballots local election offices received^a	145,413	604,644	211,749	678,732
State absentee ballots	86 %	76 %	67 %	73 %
Other ballots	13 %	17 %	31 %	23 %
Federal Write-in Absentee Ballots	1 %	7 %	2 %	4 %
Total absentee ballots local election offices counted^b	137,593	579,056	197,306	635,488

¹DOD's Defense Manpower and Data Center reported that ballots counted and ballots rejected do not always sum perfectly to ballots received for three main reasons: 1) state election officials may have misinterpreted a question or may have incorrectly entered values when responding to the survey, 2) the relationships between survey items create difficulty in maintaining all logical relationships, and 3) data for some questions required imputation, a statistical process used to estimate the value for a question when the respondent did not provide the value.

Appendix I: Description of Military and Overseas Ballots in Elections Held in 2008 through 2014

	2014 Mid-term election	2012 Presidential election	2010 Mid-term election	2008 Presidential election
State absentee ballots	88 %	77 %	68 %	65 %
Other ballots	11 %	18 %	31 %	31 %
Federal Write-in Absentee Ballots	1 %	5 %	2 %	4 %
Total absentee ballots local election offices rejected^c	8,486	33,721	14,816	39,324
State absentee ballots	67 %	45 %	42 %	55 %
Other ballots	27 %	22 %	49 %	29 %
Federal Write-in Absentee Ballots	6 %	33 %	9 %	16 %
Reasons local election offices rejected absentee ballots^d	8,486	33,721	14,770	39,324
Missed deadline	49 %	40 %	32 %	44 %
Voter signature issues	14 %	14 %	7 %	11 %
Lack of postmark	3 %	2 %	0 %	2 %
Other	34 %	44 %	61 %	43 %

Source: GAO Analysis of Election Assistance Commission Data | GAO-16-378

^aAbsentee ballots local election offices received reflects the number of ballots returned by voters that were submitted for the counting process, regardless of whether or not the ballots were later counted or rejected. Spoiled ballots, replaced ballots, and absentee ballots returned as undeliverable are identified before the counting process and by this definition are not considered to be submitted for counting.

^bAbsentee ballots local election offices counted reflects the number of ballots actually processed, counted, and recorded as votes.

^cAbsentee ballots local election offices rejected reflect ballots that local election offices determined did not meet the requirements of eligibility for various reasons, including not being properly completed, being submitted by individuals who were excluded from voting in those locations, or not being received on time.

^dThis category includes the three most common reasons that local election offices rejected absentee ballots. The Election Assistance Commission has reported some examples of other reasons local election offices rejected absentee ballots, including ballots returned in incorrect envelopes, voters returning ballots to the wrong county or precinct, missing witness signatures, the voter was deceased, the voter name or address did not match the application, and the voter had no absentee ballot application on file.

Appendix II: Implementation Status of Prior GAO Recommendations Related to Military and Overseas Voting

We have made 12 recommendations related to military and overseas voting and the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) to the Department of Defense (DOD) between 2001 and 2010. All recommendations have been closed. Of the recommendations we made, eight were closed as implemented and four were closed as not implemented. In table 5, we list the 12 recommendations and summarize the status of each recommendation at the time we closed it.

Table 5: Implementation Status of Our Prior Recommendations Related to Military and Overseas Voting

Recommendation (report number)	Status of recommendation/action taken
<p>To improve the effectiveness of DOD's absentee voting assistance efforts, the Secretary of Defense should direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to assess the methodologies currently in use to gather evaluative information on FVAP's efforts to address the requirements in DOD Directive 1000.04. (GAO-10-476)</p>	<p>Closed-not implemented</p> <p>The actions taken by DOD did not meet the intent of our recommendation. According to a December 12, 2013, memorandum from the Defense Human Resources Activity, DOD's efforts to address this recommendation are ongoing. FVAP has contracted with a federally funded research and development center to identify a methodology and metrics to evaluate efforts required by DOD Directive 1000.04.</p>
<p>To improve the effectiveness of DOD's absentee voting assistance efforts, the Secretary of Defense should direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to implement, where needed, improved and supplemental program evaluation methodologies to address concerns such as those that we identified in this report. (GAO-10-476)</p>	<p>Closed-implemented</p> <p>In response to this recommendation, in 2010 FVAP revised its post-election survey of local election officials to include a wider variety of content, such as questions on the total number of absentee ballots transmitted to each category of voters and the number of absentee ballots transmitted by the various means of communications (mail, email, or fax). By revising the survey, FVAP will have better data in its quadrennial report to the President and Congress.</p>
<p>To improve the effectiveness of DOD's absentee voting assistance efforts, the Secretary of Defense should direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to evaluate current and alternative methods for training voting assistance officers as part of federal elections. (GAO-10-476)</p>	<p>Closed-not implemented</p> <p>The actions taken by DOD did not meet the intent of our recommendation. According to a December 12, 2013, memorandum from the Defense Human Resources Activity, FVAP is continuing to evaluate the training it currently provides to voting assistance officers. However, it has not yet evaluated alternative training methods.</p>

**Appendix II: Implementation Status of Prior
GAO Recommendations Related to Military and
Overseas Voting**

Recommendation (report number)	Status of recommendation/action taken
<p>To improve the security and accuracy of DOD's electronic and Internet initiatives, the Secretary of Defense should direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to create an integrated, comprehensive, long-term, results-oriented plan for future electronic voting programs that specifies, among other things, the goals to be achieved along with tasks including identifying safeguards for the security and privacy of all DOD's voting systems—both electronic and Internet. The plan should also specify milestones, time frames, and contingencies; synchronize them with planned development of the Commission's guidelines for Internet voting; and be developed in conjunction with major stakeholders—including state and local election officials, the Election Assistance Commission, overseas voting groups, and each of the armed services. The plan should also include initiatives that will be done well in advance of federal elections, to allow adequate time for training and dissemination of information on the options available to voters covered under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA). (GAO-07-774)</p>	<p>Closed-implemented</p> <p>On April 26, 2010, the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) issued the <i>Report to Congress on EAC's Efforts to Establish Guidelines for Remote Electronic Absentee Voting Systems</i>, which contained a "Roadmap Timeline for the Development of Remote Electronic Absentee Voting Guidelines in Support of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)." This roadmap was developed in conjunction with the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and DOD's FVAP and highlights a number of efforts that the EAC along with NIST and FVAP have or plan to undertake to move towards the development of the remote electronic absentee voting guidelines.</p>
<p>To improve the security and accuracy of DOD's electronic and Internet initiatives, the Secretary of Defense should direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to institutionalize a process to review online UOCAVA guidance to ensure that DOD provides accurate and consistent information to UOCAVA voters. (GAO-07-774)</p>	<p>Closed-implemented</p> <p>In response to our recommendation, DOD developed an internal checklist that staff are to use when a change occurs to ensure consistency in online information. The checklist contains steps that staff are to take when changes are made to (1) state legislative changes, (2) the Voting Assistance Guide, (3) Voting Assistance Guide addresses, (4) voting assistance officer workshop slides or self-administered training, and (5) any other pages on the website.</p>
<p>To improve the security and accuracy of DOD's electronic and Internet initiatives, the Secretary of Defense should direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to incorporate lessons learned into plans for future systems such as those we identified, including adding cautionary statements to future ballot request and receipt systems to warn UOCAVA voters to remove personal data from their computers. (GAO-07-774)</p>	<p>Closed-implemented</p> <p>In response to our recommendation, DOD updated its FVAP website in June 2008 with an automated Voter Registration and Ballot Delivery Tool, which incorporated a cautionary statement on the login page for the new tool. The statement warns the user that the computer may have saved some of the user's personal data and instructs the user to check the browser's help file to determine how to delete any private data that has been stored during the session. The FVAP updated website also includes a disclaimer webpage, which contains an expanded version of the cautionary statement. Specifically, this statement recommends that users delete all personal data from the public computers they use before logging off the system.</p>

**Appendix II: Implementation Status of Prior
GAO Recommendations Related to Military and
Overseas Voting**

Recommendation (report number)	Status of recommendation/action taken
<p>To improve the security and accuracy of DOD's electronic and Internet initiatives, the Secretary of Defense should direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to comply with the information security requirements in the DOD Certification and Accreditation Process guidance. (GAO-07-774)</p>	<p>Closed-not implemented</p> <p>The actions taken by DOD did not meet the intent of our recommendation. As of August 2011, DOD had not implemented our recommendation to improve the security of DOD's electronic and Internet voting initiatives by complying with the DOD Certification and Accreditation Process (DIACAP) guidance for information security. Specifically, FVAP has not demonstrated certification or accreditation of the systems used to support electronic voting initiatives for either the 2008 or the 2010 elections. FVAP entered into an agreement with DOD's Washington Headquarters Services (WHS) in June 2008 to test and certify the Electronic Transmission Service using WHS' certification and accreditation contract. However, the contract as awarded did not include the FVAP test and certification requirements. In May 2010, FVAP entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with a new service provider, the Navy's Global Distance Support Center, to provide support for FVAP's Electronic Transmission Service and other systems. However, the memorandum did not include a provision for specifying the information security requirements that the support systems must meet or require certification and accreditation of these systems, and FVAP did not hold any discussions with the new service provider to ensure that the systems would meet specific information security requirements for the 2010 election. Neither FVAP nor the support center were able to demonstrate that the systems used for FVAP's electronic voting initiatives during the 2010 election period had completed certification and accreditation or obtained approvals for the results of these processes from responsible DOD executives. Moreover, significant security risks were identified in one of the election support systems used during the 2010 election period. That system did not receive approval to operate until after the close of the 2010 election, and the approval was interim while the security issues were to be addressed. Taken together, these events and artifacts indicate that DOD has not systematically applied its information security guidance to electronic voting initiatives.</p>
<p>The Secretary of Defense should direct the Director, FVAP, to develop a methodology, in conjunction with states and local jurisdictions, to gather nationally projectable data on disqualified military and overseas absentee ballots and reasons for disqualification. FVAP should do this by modifying its quadrennial survey of local election officials, analyzing the data, and publishing this analysis in its quadrennial election report to Congress. As part of this methodology, FVAP should select a random sample of jurisdictions to participate in the survey for an extended period, such as 12 years. FVAP should work with state and local election officials before the next election so respondent counties can provide input to redesign the survey and establish the necessary means for tracking data. (GAO-01-1026)</p>	<p>Closed-implemented</p> <p>FVAP is working with the Defense Manpower Data Center and a contractor to revise the survey instrument to include questions about why absentee ballots are rejected by the voting jurisdictions. The revised methodology for the Post-Election Voting Survey of Local Election Officials now includes a stratified sample of the 50 largest jurisdictions in each state and Washington, D.C., the next 449 largest jurisdictions in the U.S., and a random sample of jurisdictions from the rest of the United States. Survey questions include on the number of absentee ballots not counted and the reasons why, and selected jurisdictions were given an advance copy of the survey to provide them with an opportunity to collect the required data as the year progressed. Data will be analyzed after the 2004 presidential election and will provide nationally projectable data regarding the number of absentee ballots disqualified and the reasons for disqualification.</p>

**Appendix II: Implementation Status of Prior
GAO Recommendations Related to Military and
Overseas Voting**

Recommendation (report number)	Status of recommendation/action taken
<p>The Secretary of Defense should direct the Director, FVAP, to actively collect and share best practices identified by service and State Department voting assistance programs. (GAO-01-1026)</p>	<p>Closed-implemented FVAP's Voting Action Plan for 2002-03 requires that the Director of FVAP actively collect and share best practices identified by the services and State voting assistance programs. The Director of FVAP worked with others in DOD to implement a best practices system, and a best practices system should be in place for the 2004 election. FVAP's after action report includes a description of the best practices that have been identified as improving Service Voting Action Programs. The best practices collected are published through the FVAP website and other existing media, such as the Voting Information News newsletter and voting workshops.</p>
<p>The Secretary of Defense should direct the Director, FVAP, to consult with the services and revise DOD Directive 1000.4 to establish recommended ratios of voting assistance officers to the population served. (GAO-01-1026)</p>	<p>Closed-implemented Revised DOD guidance, which was issued in June 2002, requires that the heads of DOD components establish the ratio or maximum number of voters that can be represented by a voting assistance officer. The Air Force was the only service that has included a ratio in its guidance or voting action plan.</p>
<p>To increase the effectiveness of the DOD's voting education and assistance programs for military and overseas voters, the Secretary of Defense should direct the military service Secretaries to require that the Senior Service Voting Representatives monitor installations' voting assistance programs, including the level of command support and periodically provide briefings to FVAP that detail the services' efforts to meet the requirements outlined in the DOD directive and submit a final report by June 30th of odd-numbered years. (GAO-01-1026)</p>	<p>Closed-not implemented The actions taken by DOD did not meet the intent of our recommendation. DOD issued its revised guidance on FVAP in June 2002; however, it did not implement this recommendation in the revised guidance. Specifically, the revised directive did not require that the Senior Service Voting Representative monitor the installations voting assistance programs or periodically brief FVAP. Furthermore, it did not require that the Senior Service Voting Representative provide a report on the services' efforts to meet the requirements in the DOD directive by June 30th of odd-numbered years.</p>
<p>To increase the effectiveness of the DOD's voting education and assistance programs for military and overseas voters, the Secretary of Defense should direct the military service Secretaries to develop voting assistance directives that fully reflect the requirements of DOD Directive 1000.04. Specifically, the services' guidance should specify that trained installation and unit voting assistance officers should be appointed, that service Inspectors General review the voting assistance program during inspections, that instruction on the absentee ballot process be provided to all servicemembers, and that the voting assistance program undergo continuous evaluation. In addition, the services should clarify their guidance to clearly establish who is responsible for providing voting material to installations and voting assistance officers. The services should complete modifications to their guidance by the end of 2001. (GAO-01-1026)</p>	<p>Closed-implemented DOD concurred with the recommendation, and revised its guidance to emphasize the services' responsibilities to monitor and oversee their voting assistance program. DOD's revised instruction was effective June 3, 2002. However, not all of the services have revised their guidance to reflect the changes in the revised DOD Instruction. DOD said the FVAP would ensure that services' 2002-03 voting action plans comply with the revised guidance. All services have implemented regulations that specify that trained voting assistance officers should be appointed, service Inspectors General should review voting assistance programs, and services should clearly establish who is responsible for providing voting material to installations and voting assistance officers.</p>

Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-16-378

Appendix III: Scope and Methodology

To determine the extent to which the Department of Defense (DOD) has identified challenges associated with its military and overseas absentee voting assistance efforts and developed plans to address those challenges, we interviewed program officials at the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP); obtained relevant documents, studies, and data; and discussed their voting assistance efforts, including challenges and planned corrective actions. We interviewed the senior service voting representative and voting action officers from each of the military services, including the U.S. Coast Guard, to discuss their coordination with FVAP and management of the service voting assistance activities. We also contacted officials at other DOD organizations, the military services, other executive branch agencies, and nongovernmental organizations to discuss the challenges that FVAP faces in providing voting assistance to military and overseas voters. In table 6 we list the DOD entities, other federal agencies, and other organizations that we contacted for this review.

Table 6: Departments, Agencies, and Organizations GAO Interviewed

Department of Defense	Defense Human Resources Activity
	Federal Voting Assistance Program
	Defense Manpower Data Center
	Office of Inspector General
	Military Postal Service Agency
	United States Air Force Voting Action Officer
	United States Army Voting Action Officer
	United States Coast Guard Voting Action Officer
	United States Marine Corps Voting Action Officer
	United States Navy Voting Action Officer
Other Federal Agencies	Department of State
	Election Assistance Commission
	United States Postal Service
Other Organizations	Bipartisan Policy Center
	The Council of State Governments
	Election Center
	National Association of Secretaries of State
	The Pew Charitable Trusts
	RAND Corporation
	U.S. Vote Foundation

Source: GAO. | GAO-16-378

We reviewed reports that resulted from two studies on FVAP that DOD commissioned and that were issued in 2015 and 2014, respectively. The first study, conducted by the RAND Corporation, examined FVAP's internal operations; the second study, conducted by Lake Research Partners, identified challenges faced by overseas absentee voters, their eligible family members, DOD's voting assistance officers, overseas citizens, and local election officials. We interviewed staff from the RAND Corporation that conducted the study of FVAP's internal operations to discuss their views of the program and its challenges. We reviewed documentation that FVAP provided from the Lake Research Partners study, including transcripts from focus groups with voters covered under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA), including servicemembers, their family members, and overseas citizen to identify the absentee voting challenges faced by those FVAP customers.

We also reviewed and analyzed the results of post-election surveys that FVAP had conducted with the Defense Manpower Data Center and the Election Assistance Commission between 2008 and 2014. The surveys are used to determine participation in the electoral process by UOCAVA voters; assess the impact of FVAP's efforts to simplify and ease the process of voting absentee; evaluate progress made to facilitate absentee voting; and identify remaining obstacles to voting by individuals covered by UOCAVA. These surveys include questions for the voter about the methods voters used to cast a ballot and the effectiveness of the information sources the voters consulted. The surveys also collect data from local election officials regarding the numbers of absentee ballots processed and the reasons for rejection. We determined that that FVAP's surveys with the Defense Manpower Data Center and the Election Assistance Commission were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our report.

We reviewed communication plans and a media engagement plan that FVAP uses to promote awareness of its resources. We reviewed our previous reports on DOD's FVAP, including the recommendations that had resulted from those reports and the status of those recommendations. In addition, we learned about challenges faced by local election officials by attending an Election Data Summit sponsored by the Election Assistance Commission, in which election officials from fourteen states spoke about challenges they face. In addition, we interviewed local election officials in Virginia and Colorado, among the states with large populations of UOCAVA voters, to discuss their perspectives on challenges associated with overseas absentee voting.

We compared FVAP's identification of and plans for addressing challenges with applicable internal control standards and relevant program management criteria. Specifically, we reviewed the plans and actions that FVAP had identified to address challenges in post-election survey reports and press releases. We compared FVAP's actions with Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government, which call for agencies to complete and document actions to remediate challenges on a timely basis.¹ We also compared those actions with the Project Management Body of Knowledge practice for identifying time frames associated with projects to determine whether projects are meeting their goals.² The PMBOK® Guide provides guidelines for managing individual projects, including developing a project management plan.

We interviewed officials from the U.S. Postal Service and the Military Postal Service Agency to discuss the process for identifying and transmitting UOCAVA election materials and ballots, and to determine how those agencies track the transit time for UOCAVA ballots. We also obtained information regarding Military Postal Service Agency's process for developing recommended dates by which UOCAVA voters should mail their completed ballots in order for those ballots to return in time for local election offices to count, and compared the 2016 recommended mailing times with related statutory requirements for the transmission of ballots to voters.³

To determine the extent to which has DOD implemented strategic planning practices to help ensure the long-term effectiveness of FVAP, we reviewed documentation of FVAP's long-term planning, including information FVAP provides on its public website; annual budget estimates

¹GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*. [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D. C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

²Project Management Institute, Inc. *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*. (PMBOK® Guide), Fifth Edition, 2013.

³Under section 20302 of Title 52, U.S. Code, states are required to transmit a validly requested absentee ballot to a voter not later than 45 days before a federal election, if the request is received at least 45 days before the election. 52 U.S.C. § 20302(a)(8)(A). States may seek waivers from the presidential designee in certain circumstances. See § 20302(g). Additionally, in the case in which a request is received fewer than 45 days before a federal election, states are to transmit a ballot in accordance with state law and in a manner that expedites transmission, if practicable and determined appropriate by the state. See § 20302(a)(8)(B).

FVAP submits to the Defense Human Resource Agency, which include strategic goals and performance measures that FVAP intends to measure progress toward those goals; FVAP's annual reports to Congress, which include FVAP's goals and actions it intends to take to meet those goals; and documentation of the performance metrics FVAP uses to collect data to monitor its activities. We also reviewed a cooperative agreement between the Defense Human Resources Activity and the Council of State Governments related to FVAP; commissioned reports from the RAND Corporation and Lake Research Partners; and annual reports from 2008-14 that the DOD Inspector General conducted on FVAP and the services' implementation of their respective voting assistance programs. We interviewed relevant DOD and military service officials, as well as key stakeholder officials from the Election Assistance Commission, the Department of State, U.S. Vote Foundation, and selected local election offices, among others, to discuss their coordination with FVAP and their knowledge of FVAP's long-term planning activities.

We compared these activities with leading practices for strategic planning that we have identified in prior work, informed, in part, by requirements from the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act. Specifically, in prior work, we identified six leading practices in federal strategic planning by reviewing (1) the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993, as updated by the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010⁴ (2) associated Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance;⁵ and (3) related leading practices that we have identified in past work.⁶ We selected the six leading practices because, according to

⁴We have previously reported that Government Performance and Results Act requirements, even where not directly applicable, can serve as leading practices for strategic planning at lower levels within federal agencies than those at which the act generally applies, such as planning for individual programs or initiatives. For example, see GAO, *Foreign Aid Reform: Comprehensive Strategy, Interagency Coordination, and Operational Improvements Would Bolster Current Efforts*, [GAO-09-192](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 17, 2009), p. 31.

⁵In prior work identifying the leading practices, we reviewed Office of Management and Budget, *Circular A-11, Section 210: Preparing and Submitting an Agency Strategic Plan*, July 2010.

⁶For example, see GAO, *Executive Guide: Effectively Implementing the Government Performance and Results Act*, [GAO/IGD-96-118](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 1, 1996); *Tax Administration: IRS Needs to Further Refine Its Tax Filing Season Performance Measures*, [GAO-03-143](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 22, 2002); *Managing for Results: Strengthening Regulatory Agencies' Performance Management Practices*, [GAO-GGD-00-10](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 28, 1999).

officials, FVAP's current strategic planning efforts are in the initial planning stage, and we judged these practices to be the most relevant to evaluating FVAP's strategic planning activities to date.

To assess whether FVAP planning activities exhibited each of the six selected leading practices in federal strategic planning, two analysts independently conducted a content analysis of documents related to DOD's plans for its UOCAVA voter assistance program to determine the extent to which they exhibited six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning. The analysts independently rated each of the six selected leading practices as "exhibits," "partially exhibits," or "does not exhibit" by DOD. We determined that DOD "exhibits" a leading practice for federal strategic planning when FVAP's activities explicitly addressed all characteristics set forth in the leading practice and determined that DOD "partially exhibits" a leading practice when FVAP's activities addressed at least one or more characteristics of the leading practice, but not all characteristics of the leading practice. Finally, we determined that DOD "does not exhibit" a leading practice when FVAP's activities did not address any characteristics of the leading practice. We compared the two sets of independent observations, discussed how each analyst arrived at the assigned rating, and collectively reconciled any rating differences.

We conducted this performance audit from June 2015 to April 2016 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix IV: Federal Post Card Application

The Federal Post Card Application acts as a registration and absentee ballot request form for absent servicemembers, their families, and citizens residing outside the United States. The Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) provides the Federal Post Card Application to the services for distribution to overseas voters. In addition, on its website, FVAP compiles and distributes descriptive material on state procedures related to the application and instructions for completing and sending the application.

Figure 3: Federal Post Card Application (p. 1 of 2)

**Voter Registration and Absentee Ballot Request
Federal Post Card Application (FPCA)**

For any questions about this form, consult the Voting Assistance Guide available in hard copy or on FVAP.gov or your Voting Assistance Officer.

For absent Uniformed Service members, their families, and citizens residing outside the U.S. Please print in black ink.

Classification
Make only 1 selection.
(In most States, you must be absent from your voting district to use this form.)

1 I request an absentee ballot for all elections in which I am eligible to vote AND:
 I am a member of the Uniformed Services or Merchant Marine on active duty OR I am an eligible spouse or dependent.
 I am an activated National Guard member on State orders.
 I am a U.S. citizen residing outside the United States, and I intend to return.
 I am a U.S. citizen residing outside the United States, and my return is not certain.
 I am a U.S. citizen and have never resided in the United States.

Political party

2 Your State may require you to specify a political party to vote in primary elections: _____

Legal name

3 Last name _____ Suffix _____
 First name _____ Middle name _____
 Previous name (if applicable) _____

Identification
Some States require your full SSN. Check your State's pages in the Voting Assistance Guide on FVAP.gov.

4 State Driver's License or ID _____
 OR Social Security Number _____
 Birth date / / Sex M F Race _____
See instructions

Contact information
Include international prefixes. No DSN numbers.

5 Telephone _____
 Fax _____
 Email _____

Ballot receipt

6 Rank from 1-3 in order of preference; be sure appropriate contact information is provided above.
 I prefer to receive my ballot, as permitted by my State, by: Email/Online Mail Fax

Voting residence address
Usually your last U.S. residence or your legal U.S. residence. See instructions.

7 Street Address (not P.O. box) _____ Apt. # _____
 City/Town/Village _____
 County _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Where to send my ballot
This is your current mailing address and should be different from above. If required, place a forwarding address in Box 9.

8 _____

Additional requirements for your State
Such as: mail forwarding address, additional email address/phone number, or other State required information. See Voting Assistance Guide.

9 _____

Affirmation (REQUIRED): I swear or affirm, under penalty of perjury, that:

- The information on this form is true, accurate, and complete to the best of my knowledge. I understand that a material misstatement of fact in completion of this document may constitute grounds for conviction of perjury.
- I am a U.S. citizen, at least 18 years of age (or will be by the day of the election), eligible to vote in the requested jurisdiction, and
- I am not disqualified to vote due to having been convicted of a felony or other disqualifying offense, nor have I been adjudicated mentally incompetent; or if so, my voting rights have been reinstated; and
- I am not registering, requesting a ballot, or voting in any other jurisdiction in the United States, except the jurisdiction cited in this voting form.

Signature _____ You must sign and send in.
Today's date / /
Witness signature / date if required by your State.
 Signature _____
 Date _____

This information is for official use only. Any unauthorized release may be punishable by law. PREVIOUS EDITIONS ARE OBSOLETE. Standard Form 76 (Rev. 09-2013), OMB No. 0704-0502

Source: Federal Voting Assistance Program. | GAO-16-378

Figure 3: Federal Post Card Application (p. 2 of 2)

Standard Form 76 (Rev. 08-2013)

Instructions for Federal Post Card Application Voter Registration and Absentee Ballot Request

For any questions about this form, consult the Voting Assistance Guide available in hard copy or on FVAP.gov or your Voting Assistance Officer.

The gray numbers and instructions below correspond to the gray/numbered boxes on the face of the form.

- 1 The classification you choose may determine in which election(s) you will be allowed to vote. Choose the one that best represents your current situation.
- 2 If you want to vote in primary elections, most States require you to specify a political party. Check your State's pages in the Voting Assistance Guide on FVAP.gov to see if your State requires you to specify a political party.
- 3 The information you enter for your name should match the information you normally put on legal or official forms. For example, it should be the same name that appears on your Driver's License or other government-issued ID.
- 4 While most States allow you to enter either your Driver's License number or the last 4 digits of your Social Security Number, some will invalidate this form without your full SSN. Check your State's pages in the Voting Assistance Guide on FVAP.gov to see if your State requires the full SSN. Also, many States ask that you provide your race or ethnic group in order to demonstrate that they are complying with the Voting Rights Act and the National Voter Registration Act.
- 5 If there are questions or problems with your form, local election officials will use this information to contact you. An email address is the simplest and fastest way for them to do so. Your voting materials will be sent to the email address that you provide here if you request it and your State allows it. Include an alternate email or phone number in Box 9 if necessary.
- 6 Indicate your preferred method for receiving your ballot by ranking each box 1, 2, or 3. All States and jurisdictions must send absentee ballots to military and overseas voters by at least one of the following: email, online download, or fax if requested. Check your State's pages in the Voting Assistance Guide on FVAP.gov to learn what your State allows. You can always get your absentee ballot by mail.
- 7 This determines the jurisdiction where you vote. For military voters the voting address is your legal U.S. residence. For overseas citizens this is usually the U.S. address where you last lived. You do not need to have any current physical ties to this address. Do not use a post office box number. If the area has no street names, enter the route number and box number.
- 8 Enter the address where you want voting materials to be sent. Voting materials will be sent to this address unless you enter a forwarding address in Box 9.
- 9 Enter anything here that would help ensure that your ballot is accepted. Check your State's pages in the Voting Assistance Guide on FVAP.gov for anything your State may specifically require here. For example, some States require last date of residency in the U.S., previous location of registration, overseas employer, or witness address. If you want your voting materials to be sent somewhere other than where you live now, enter that alternate (forwarding) address here. Provide an alternate email address and phone number here.

Affirmation Read this carefully. It is what you are agreeing to under oath and penalty of perjury by filling out and sending in this form. Some States require that your form be witnessed. Check the Voting Assistance Guide on FVAP.gov for your State's requirements.

Agency Disclosure Statement

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 15 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to the Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Executive Service Directorate, Information Management Division, 4800 Mark Center Drive, East Tower, Suite 02009, Alexandria, VA 22304-3100. (OMB CONTROL # 0704-0503). Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR COMPLETED FORM TO THE ADDRESS ABOVE.

Privacy Act Statement

Authority: The authority to collect your personal information on this form comes from 42 USC 1973f, "Informed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (IOCAVA)."

Principal Purpose: This form serves as an application for registration and/or request for absentee ballot for all persons covered by IOCAVA.

Routine Use(s): There is no retention of this information by the Federal government. Completed forms are sent by you to an appropriate State election official.

Disclosure: Your disclosure of personal information is voluntary. However, failure to provide the requested personal information may keep the pertinent jurisdiction from processing this request and may prevent you from voting absentee.

From
(Your name and current complete military or overseas mailing address)

International airmail postage is required if not mailed in the U.S. Postal Service, APO/FPO system, or diplomatic pouch.



U.S. Postage Paid
39 USC 3406

PAR AVION



OFFICIAL ABSENTEE BALLOTING MATERIAL – FIRST CLASS MAIL

NO POSTAGE NECESSARY IN THE U.S. MAIL – DMM 703.8.0

To
(Your local election office in the United States. Check your State's pages in the Voting Assistance Guide on FVAP.gov for contact information.)

Source: Federal Voting Assistance Program. | GAO-16-378

Appendix V: Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot

The Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot is a write-in backup ballot that absent servicemembers, their families, and citizens residing outside the U.S. can complete to vote in federal general elections. The Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) provides the ballot to the services for distribution to overseas voters. In addition, FVAP compiles descriptive material on state procedures related to the ballot and provides instructions for completing and sending the ballot on its website.

Figure 4: Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot (p. 1 of 4)

Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot (FWAB)

For absent Uniformed Service members, their families, and citizens residing outside the U.S.

For any questions about this form, consult the Voting Assistance Guide available in hard copy or on FVAP.gov or your Voting Assistance Officer.

Instructions for Voter's Declaration/Affirmation

The **gray** numbers and instructions below correspond to the **gray** numbered boxes on the face of the form.

- 1** In most States, you must have registered and requested an absentee ballot from your voting jurisdiction to use this form. If you have not done this, you cannot use this form unless your State allows voter registration via the FWAB. If your State does not allow you to register to vote using this form and you have not already submitted a Federal Post Card Application or registered/requested an absentee ballot by other means, your FWAB will not be counted.
- 2** The classification you choose may determine in which election(s) you will be allowed to vote. Choose the one that best represents your current situation.
- 3** The information you enter for your name should match the information you used to register to vote. The local election official who receives this form will match this to your voter registration information.
- 4** While most States allow you to enter either your Driver's License number or the last 4 digits of your Social Security Number, some will invalidate this form without your full SSN. Check your State's pages in the Voting Assistance Guide on FVAP.gov to see if your State requires the full SSN.
- 5** Also, many States ask that you provide your race or ethnic group in order to demonstrate that they are complying with the Voting Rights Act and the National Voter Registration Act.
- 6** If there are questions about your form, local election officials will use this information to contact you. An email address is the simplest and fastest way for them to do so. Your voting materials will be sent to the email address(es) that you provide here if you request it and your State allows it. Include an alternate phone number in Box 9 if necessary.
- 7** If you want to vote in primary elections, most States require you to specify a political party.
- 8** This determines the jurisdiction where you vote. For military voters the voting address is your legal U.S. residence. For overseas citizens this is usually the U.S. address where you last lived. You do not need to have any current physical ties to this address. Do not use a post office box number. If the area has no street names, enter the route number and box number. The address you enter here must match the address you used when you requested an absentee ballot.
- 9** Enter the address where you want voting materials to be sent. Voting materials will be sent to this address unless you enter a forwarding address in Box 9.
- 10** Enter anything here that would help ensure your ballot is accepted. Indicate your preferred method for receiving future ballots: email, online download, or fax if requested. You can always get your absentee ballot by mail. Check your State's pages in the Voting Assistance Guide on FVAP.gov for anything your State may specifically require here.

Affirmation Read this carefully. It is what you are agreeing to under oath and penalty of perjury by filling out and sending in this form. Some States require that your form be witnessed. Check your State's pages in the Voting Assistance Guide for your State's requirements.

Instructions for Official Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot

To vote, write in either a candidate's name or a political party for each office. Your State may allow you to vote in State and local elections in the Addendum section of this ballot. If you submit the FWAB and later receive your State ballot you should make every reasonable effort to inform your local election office and return your State ballot.

Some States allow you to send your Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot electronically after printing, signing and scanning.

To return by mail, fold the ballot. Put it in a blank envelope, seal the envelope, and mark it "Security Envelope." This security envelope keeps your vote private.

Put the security envelope and the Declaration / Affirmation form into a larger envelope together. Seal the larger envelope.

To send your ballot:

- For non-U.S. mailing, put the correct amount of local postage in the top right corner on the front of the large envelope.
- In the upper left corner, enter your current complete military or overseas mailing address and the election date.
- Under "To," enter the name and mailing address of the local election official to whom you are sending the packet. It must be the same local election office where you sent your request for an absentee ballot.

Agency Disclosure Statement

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 15 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to the Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Executive Services Directorate, Information Management Division, 4800 Mark Center Drive, East Tower, Suite 02G09, Alexandria, VA 22350-3100. [OMB CONTROL #0704-0502]. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR COMPLETED FORM TO THE ADDRESS ABOVE.

Privacy Act Statement

Authority: The authority to collect your personal information on this form comes from 42 USC 1973ff, "Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)."

Principal Purpose: This form serves as a write-in absentee ballot for elections for Federal office or other elections provided by State law or special provisions for all persons covered by UOCAVA.

Routine Use(s): There is no retention of this information by the Federal government. Completed forms are sent by you to an appropriate State election official.

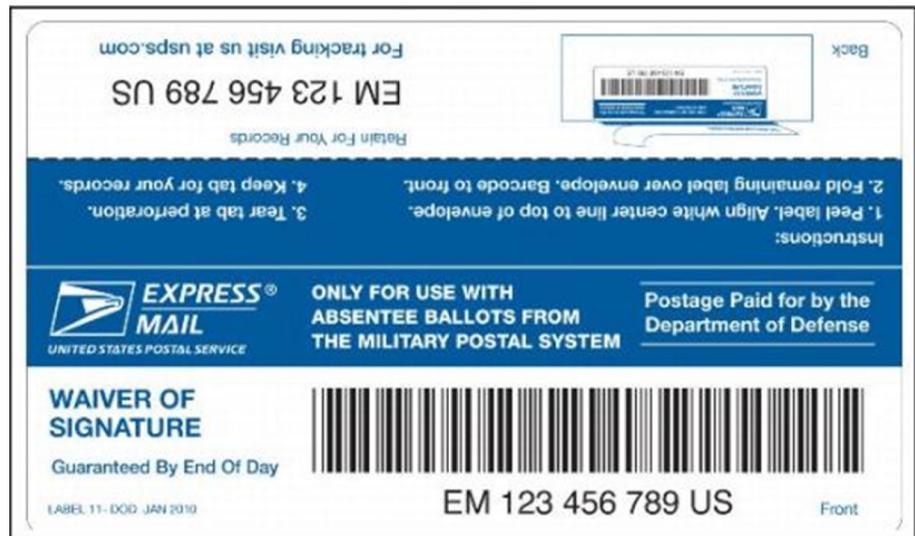
Disclosure: Your disclosure of personal information is voluntary. However, failure to provide the requested information may result in the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot not being recognized and therefore not counted.

Source: Federal Voting Assistance Program. | GAO-16-378

Appendix VI: Postal Identification Label and Tag for Military and Overseas Absentee Ballots

Servicemembers in overseas military postal locations can use Label 11-DOD to return envelopes containing completed absentee ballots via Express Mail service—the fastest mail service offered by the U.S. Postal Service—for regularly scheduled federal general elections. The U.S. Postal Service produces and supplies the label to the Department of Defense (DOD). The Joint Military Postal Activity, which monitors all postal functions for military post offices with Army Post Office, Fleet Post Office, Armed Force America, and Armed Forces Europe designations, supplies the Label-11 DOD to all Army and Fleet Post Offices.

Figure 5: Label 11-DOD

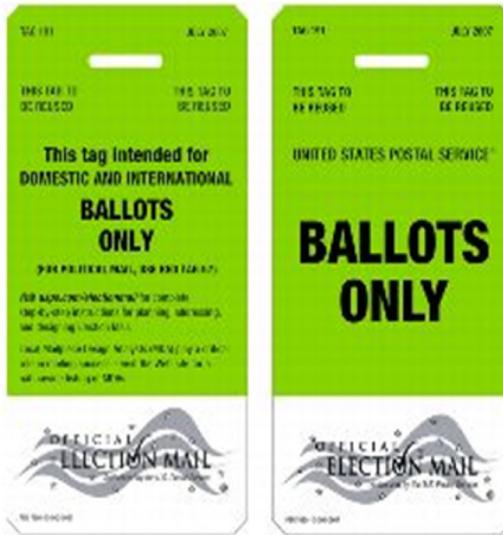


Source: Military Postal Service Agency. | GAO-16-378

Tag 191 is developed and distributed by the U.S. Postal Service, and used by election officials to identify ballot mail prepared at the First-Class Mail or Standard Mail rates and addressed for domestic or international delivery. Although use of the tag is optional, it provides greater visibility to containers of ballot mail as they move through Postal Service processing and distribution operations.

Appendix VI: Postal Identification Label and Tag for Military and Overseas Absentee Ballots

Figure 6: Tag 191



Source: Military Postal Service Agency. | GAO-16-378

Appendix VII: Comments from the Department of Defense



PERSONNEL AND
READINESS

OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000

MAR 29 2016

Ms. Brenda S. Farrell
Director, Defense Capabilities Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington DC 20548

Dear Ms. Farrell,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report GAO-16-378, "ELECTIONS: DoD Needs More Comprehensive Planning to Address Military and Overseas Absentee Voting Challenges," dated March 4, 2016 (GAO Code 352040).

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft report. We appreciate the time and effort put forth by your staff in collecting information for the preparation of this report. Please see the enclosure for our responses to the report's recommendations.

The Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) embraces the Six Selected Leading Practices of Federal Strategic Planning and will produce a final strategic plan this year based upon guidance provided in the thorough third-party review FVAP commissioned the RAND Corporation to perform. FVAP will share the final strategic plan upon its release in December. Addressed below are the characteristics identified as missing for each of the practices below:

1. *Define the mission and goals.* FVAP will make the complete plan publicly available in December 2016.

2. *Define strategies that address management challenges and identify resources needed to achieve goals.* Most factors that influence the success of a voter are outside the control, or even influence, of DoD. States run elections and individual voters must take the actions necessary to register to vote, request a ballot and vote in a timely manner. FVAP works to facilitate the process between these groups and to improve areas where it has the ability to affect the process. This includes working with the Military Postal Service Agency where FVAP's direct impact is minimal.

3. *Ensure leadership involvement and accountability.* DoD has a well-established chain of command in carrying out its responsibilities under the *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)*. The lines of accountability are articulated in DoD Directive 5124.02, "Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness," June 23, 2008, and DoD Instruction 1000.04, "Federal Voting Assistance Program," September 13, 2012.

4. *Involve Stakeholders.* Stakeholder involvement was a prime requirement of the RAND research study, as the research team needed to gauge their views of FVAP's responsibilities. These clarifications led to the creation of improved communication strategies to rectify those beliefs that were inconsistent with actual program goals and responsibilities. Realizing that some of the inconsistencies regarding the understanding of FVAP's role were in part due to prior communications from FVAP, it was critical to understand how each stakeholder thought of FVAP to work toward a future relationship built upon mutually agreed upon understanding.

**Appendix VII: Comments from the Department
of Defense**

These responsibilities are incorporated throughout FVAP's strategic plan development and day-to-day operations.

5. *Coordinate with other Federal agencies.* FVAP coordinated with other Federal agencies in the development of its mission, goals, and strategies as they were included in the RAND study; the positive and productive collaboration resulted in the newly defined and focused strategic goals.

6. *Develop and use performance measures.* FVAP and each of its employees are evaluated under yearly performance measures tied to the work done on a daily basis. These are also tied to FVAP's overall mission and will be updated accordingly concurrent with the release of the FVAP strategic plan. The updated performance measures will continue to track upward from the individual to the FVAP office, the Defense Human Resources Activity, the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, and overall Departmental strategies and goals.

While we agree with the need for a long-term strategic plan, we take issue with the draft GAO report's conclusion that the current lack of such a plan has hindered FVAP's ability to respond to the challenges faced in the military and overseas citizen voting environment. The enclosure clearly delineates many of the data-driven efforts FVAP is undertaking in 2016 as described in its 2014 Report to Congress. The Department continues to focus on areas where some level of control or influence exists. Additionally, FVAP communicates with stakeholders on a regular basis to clarify the Department's responsibilities and provide a realistic interpretation of its role in the absentee voting process.

As of the date of this letter, the FVAP staff is in full execution mode, carrying out the organization's planned programs and activities in support of the 2016 elections; its top priority is the provision of customer service to voters and election officials.

We agree there is always room for improvement, and the Department is committed to ensuring that every Service member, eligible family member, and overseas citizen who wants to vote has the tools and resources required to successfully cast a ballot in elections for federal office.

Respectfully yours,



Brad Carson
Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary of
Defense for Personnel and Readiness,
Performing the Duties of the Principal
Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for
Personnel and Readiness

Enclosure:
As stated

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED MARCH 4, 2016
GAO-16-378 (GAO CODE 352040)

“ELECTIONS: DOD NEEDS MORE COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING TO ADDRESS
MILITARY AND OVERSEAS ABSENTEE VOTING CHALLENGES”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to establish time frames to complete actions that its Federal Voting Assistance Program has identified it will take to address challenges, and also to use these time frames to demonstrate progress for stakeholders, including through its statutorily required annual reporting.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially concur. While we agree that established time frames can provide a “yard stick” in which to measure program effectiveness, a practical reality is that any recommendations featured in FVAP’s reports to Congress are taken for immediate action and incorporation into FVAP’s next federal election window. This programmatic practice has been in place for several election cycles which provide a natural time frame for completion. For example, below are the programmatic developments that are complete or currently underway in support of the 2016 election cycle per the recommendations for action in FVAP’s 2014 Report to Congress.

Awareness of Resources

The Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) has many efforts underway to increase awareness of DoD’s myriad voting assistance resources. This goal is particularly important for FVAP because post-election data continually reveal a statistically significant positive relationship between DoD resource use and the increased likelihood of a military of overseas citizen returning an absentee ballot.

Historically, FVAP has leveraged DoD’s network of Voting Assistance Officers. FVAP continues to work closely with the Military Services to train and inform Voting Assistance Officers but it also is attempting to bridge a wide gap by communicating directly with individual voters. Rather than relying solely on the Services to reach voters, FVAP created a suite of marketing and outreach materials, conducts communication campaigns and operates an internal call center. Following the 2014 election, FVAP conducted a systematic review of its materials to identify potential challenges with the language, design and organization of content. The majority of the military population is under the age of 30; to reach and communicate more effectively with this demographic, FVAP created new content tailored specifically for a generation that primarily interacts through digital and social media platforms.

For its publication of the 2016-2017 *Voting Assistance Guide*, FVAP already moved forward with standardizing its language and content to reflect plain language principles and enhance the

level of standardization in content. This effort is complete and better reflects the challenge for FVAP to display content that serves both the needs of the voters and Unit Voting Assistance Officers operating in the field.

FVAP further examined the relationship and influence of spouses on the voting behavior of active duty military and how best to leverage them as a key information resource. Survey data have shown that married active duty military (ADM) have higher participation and absentee voting rates. Married ADM also reported higher rates of requesting and returning absentee ballots compared to unmarried ADM in 2014. The goal of this project is to leverage results of research findings and the resources available to tap this demographic and boost awareness of FVAP services and resources across this population. Key efforts will focus on identifying and establishing a Point Of Contact within each of the Service family advocacy/readiness directorates and distribute information to them for further dissemination of absentee voting information throughout the 2016 election cycle for ADM spouses. Impacts will be measured through the conduct of the post-election survey for active duty military and the possible continuation of a separate spouse survey.

As part of its recent efforts, RAND examined the collection and application of metrics for the voting assistance program, including those reported by the Voting Assistance Officers to develop a model for how these metrics can be used to assess election year performance and permit course corrections. This approach will yield value over time as it is premised on the observation of metrics over time and the difference between historical values versus those that are observed in the midst of an election year. FVAP completed development of how to leverage these data and will be piloting this effort in 2016.

Additionally, because military families are highly mobile and might move every two or three years, submitting a new registration and ballot request may not top their list of priorities – or they might not even be aware they should. To help address this issue, FVAP has inserted address-update reminders into the automated change-of-duty-station process (via milConnect) and is working continually to improve education and outreach efforts informing these citizens of the importance of keeping their contact information current with election officials.

Ultimately, the decision to vote is up to the individual regardless of their awareness of the resources available.

Following the 2016 General Election, FVAP will refine its analysis and apply 2016 metrics into its approach for the future now as a fixed approach and application of metrics. FVAP will also furnish a full accounting of these efforts in its 2016 Post-Election Report to Congress.

Postal Delivery of Ballots

Although the ability to directly affect systematic changes to mail processes is limited, FVAP works closely with the Military Postal Service Agency (MPSA) to offer guidance and communicate trends reported from the election community. It is important to note that while electronic delivery of blank balloting materials holds significant promise for improving the absentee voting success rate for *UOCAVA* voters, determining the exact impact of recent

amendments to *UOCAVA* requires more deliberate research using quantitative analysis. Much of the recent research referenced in the draft GAO report was qualitative in nature, so FVAP encourages a cautionary approach for those who may be tempted to infer conclusions for the entire cohort. An additional overlay of time frames by FVAP regarding efforts for improvement to postal delivery could be counterproductive since the process is controlled by stakeholders other than FVAP.

State Processes

FVAP entered into a cooperative agreement with the Council of State Governments (CSG) in an effort to build State election administrators' and policymakers' awareness and understanding of the Department's voting assistance mission, as well as identify ways to improve the absentee voting process. The CSG Overseas Voting Initiative was formed through the agreement and is charged with developing targeted and actionable improvements to the voting process for military and overseas citizen voters.

CSG's Overseas Voting Initiative maintains two separate advisory working groups. These groups are making significant progress in providing State policymakers and State and local election officials with best practice guidance to ensure *UOCAVA* citizens are able to exercise their right to vote. Though FVAP has worked closely with election officials in the past, the working groups facilitate true collaboration. Through its cooperative agreement with CSG, FVAP has the ability to improve the actual absentee voting process for military and overseas voters.

FVAP is actively engaged in research during the 2016 election cycle in two significant areas:

1. The Council of State Governments (CSG), MPSA and the United States Postal Service (USPS) are currently working through a pilot program that will enable full tracking for the entire lifecycle of a ballot through the USPS and MPSA mailstream. This tracking is currently scoped to cover both the blank ballot delivery process and the return side of the voted ballot. The intent of this effort is to increase the level of customer service for military voters through regular updates on where absentee voting materials are at in the process, as well as provide transactional-level data for research to assess the overall challenges with the absentee voting process.
2. CSG is leveraging the principle of data standardization to pilot an approach for moving away from the reliance on survey data. This pilot will examine the use of transactional information that is structured in such a way that it provides answers to all of FVAP's survey questions of election officials, but provides transaction-level data for voters to identify key contributors for ballot rejections (e.g., voters applying late in the process increasing likelihood of ballot rejections).

The time frames established for both of these efforts will yield initial results in 2016, and FVAP will look to incorporate preliminary findings into its 2016 Post-Election Report to Congress. Other activities commissioned by FVAP contained within the CSG Cooperative Agreement reflect other elements of research and recommendations that need more consideration and further stakeholder involvement prior to moving into the FVAP portfolio of services. Again, FVAP

looks forward to sharing updates on these activities in either its formal strategic plan or as the work is completed.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommends that the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, through the Defense Human Resources Activity, direct FVAP's Director to fully implement the six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning into the day-to-day operations of the program.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. However, it should be noted that the public release of overall findings from RAND's assessment on the FVAP organizational structure was the formal trigger for these efforts to begin in earnest. As noted in the RAND report, initial steps were taken in 2015 during RAND's investigative process to position FVAP as a customer-focused service delivery organization for the 2016 election cycle. FVAP's reorganization continues to pay dividends, as does its focus on a core mission for *UOCAVA* voters of providing direct assistance. The perception of some stakeholders that FVAP's direction may be a result of personal agendas within FVAP is acknowledged, but this likely comes from experiences with FVAP's recently withdrawn requirement to conduct an electronic voting demonstration project and the resulting perception of some stakeholders that FVAP's scope was overreaching. FVAP's current efforts are focused and constrained to its statutory authority and looks forward to formalizing all of these gains in a future release of its formal strategic plan.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The GAO recommends that the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, through the Defense Human Resources Activity, direct FVAP's Director to complete the development of a strategic plan that fully exhibits the six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning, including, but not limited to:

- A statement of FVAP's revised mission and goals;
- An identification of strategies that address management challenges and resources needed to achieve goals;
- A description of leadership involvement and accountability;
- A description of stakeholder involvement in the development of FVAP priorities;
- A coordination strategy to communicate the program's mission and goals to other federal agencies; and
- A description of performance measures, aligned with program goals, that FVAP will use to track progress toward goals.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. FVAP has made significant progress in the development of its strategic plan as much of the findings from the RAND research completed in 2015 provide the public framework for the formal crafting of the FVAP Strategic Plan. FVAP's initial reorganizational efforts completed in 2015 have been guiding the organization throughout the preparation and its execution of the 2016 election cycle voting assistance program; it is an example of the direct application and rapid response in which FVAP undertook programmatic reforms due to RAND's assessment.

Appendix VIII: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

Contact

Brenda S. Farrell, (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov

Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Kimberly Mayo, Assistant Director; Sara Cradic; Alana Finley; Rebecca Gambler; Stephanie Heiken; Tom Jessor; Mae Jones; Tamiya Lunsford; Michael McKemey; Amanda Miller; Terry Richardson; Michael Shaughnessy; Amie Lesser; and Leslie Stubbs made key contributions to this report.

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