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VOTING ASSISTANCE OFFICERS BUSY HELPING AMERICANS IN EUROPE REGISTER TO CAST THEIR BALLOTS

By Dave Melancon

Staff writer, Heidelberg Herald-Post

HEIDELBERG, Germany -- The 2008 election year officially kicks off Jan. 3, with the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire presidential primary taking place Jan. 8 and other state primaries following right behind.

Election Day -- Nov. 4, 2008 -- is less than a year away, and U.S. Army Europe and Installation Management Command-Europe's senior voting assistance officers are busy helping register Americans who want to cast their ballots.

"Unit and U.S. Army Garrison voting assistance officers are handing out voter registration cards a lot earlier than in prior years," said Maj. Harry Turasz, U.S. Army Europe's chief voting assistance officer.

The VAOs who help Soldiers, Family members, Department of Defense civilian employees, retirees and contractors register to vote learn their duties via online training and by attending workshops led by Federal Voting Assistance Program trainers. VAOs can also help identify a voter's county of record in the U.S. and assist with filling out the Federal Post Card Application used to register voters away from home.

VAOs can assist any eligible U.S. citizen to register, not only those associated with the military, said Donald Wade, IMCOM-Europe's senior voting assistance officer.

If the VAO has difficulties with a voter's particular circumstances, he'll refer the voter to a legal office for assistance, Wade added.

While VAOs do everything they can to assist voters, they cannot influence a voter's ballot choices. "We are not supposed to show any favoritism toward any candidate," Turasz said.

The registration process varies from state to state, but all 50 states and U.S. territories recognize and accept the Federal Post Card Application -- U.S. Government Printing

Office Standard Form 76 -- which voters can get from their VAOs or download from the FVAP web site, Turasz said.

“A voter fills out the FPCA and sends it into their county election office in the U.S.,” he explained. “The FPCA registers the individual and requests an absentee ballot.”

The major pointed out that every state has different voting registration procedures and different deadlines for receipt of the FPCA.

Once the application is filled out, it can be mailed postage-free, and in some cases, faxed or e-mailed to the voter’s state, county or other election officials.

Registering to vote now helps ensure an overseas voter’s ballot is counted, Wade said.

“We should remember recent elections where absentee ballots played a significant role in deciding the outcome,” Wade said. “If we failed to vote, we allowed others to make the decision for us.”

Turasz said military telephone operators in Europe have updated lists of unit VAOs and their telephone numbers. Voting information and VAO contact information can also be found on the USAREUR personnel directorate web site at www.per.hqusareur.army.mil.

Links to state voting registrars and comprehensive voting information are available at the FVAP web site at www.fvap.gov.



www.hqusareur.army.mil