



# NEWS RELEASE

RUTH JOHNSON, OAKLAND COUNTY CLERK/REGISTER

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## Operation: Our Troops Count

### Oakland, Macomb and Wayne Clerks Announce Campaign to Ensure Overseas Troops' Votes Are Counted On Election Day

#### Technology and Legislation Will Help Fix Michigan's Broken Military Voting System

Macomb County, MI – Thursday, July 2 – Days before America celebrates its freedom, the county clerks for Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties announced Operation: Our Troops Count – an all-out campaign to make sure overseas troops' votes get here in time to be counted on Election Day.

Michigan, in a national report issued earlier this year by the Pew Center on the States, was one of 16 states failing overseas troops by not ensuring their votes are returned in time to be counted – nearly always because of overseas mailing delays.

“You can’t read this report without getting angry,” said Oakland County Clerk Ruth Johnson during a press conference at Freedom Hill County Park in Sterling Heights. “These are men and women often risking their lives to protect our freedom. We have to step up and make sure their right to vote is protected here at home.”

Working together with Johnson are Carmella Sabaugh, the Macomb County Clerk, and Wayne County Clerk Cathy Garrett. The women represent a formidable trio from various backgrounds who have worked together on other, non-partisan election reform issues.

“The U.S. Military transmits intelligence reports, battle plans and even personal family messages securely around the world in seconds,” Sabaugh said. “But state law bureaucracy currently blocks elections officials from securely transmitting absent voter application forms to soldiers, preventing some who are fighting for our democracy from participating in it.”

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At issue largely are delays caused by the use of overseas mail. Unlike other states, where absentee ballots are faxed or emailed, Michigan's absent voter application forms and ballots are sent through the mail. A soldier's application for a Michigan absent ballot, the clerk's mailing of the ballot, and the soldier's return mail of the ballot can take six weeks or more.

"Oakland County Clerk Ruth Johnson, Wayne County Clerk Cathy Garrett and I believe we need to make sure those fighting for democracy can participate in it," said Macomb County Clerk / Register of Deeds Carmella Sabaugh. "We can do it with existing technology while cutting taxpayer postage costs."

In the November 2008 general election, for example, nearly 30 percent of the Macomb County absent voter ballots mailed overseas – 225 of 774 – were not returned on or before Election Day. Overseas mail delays were definitely part of the problem, say the clerks. This contrasts with just 3 percent of Macomb County absent voter ballots mailed to citizens within the United States that were not returned.

"Our troops are defending democracy abroad and we need to defend democracy here at home and make sure their votes count," said Wayne County Clerk Cathy Garrett in a prepared statement.

As part of Operation: Our Troops Count, the clerks requested legislation to allow absentee voter applications to be sent to overseas troops and their families by email – something already done in nearly 30 states across the nation. Legislation has been drafted and will be introduced by State Rep. Vince Gregory (D-Southfield.)

The non-partisan change would provide less than a 24-hour turnaround time to get absentee ballots to troops once a request is made, reduce postage fees for local communities and be implemented statewide at no cost. The proposed system would be extremely secure. Every absentee ballot overseas – just like every absentee ballot distributed within the United States – is tied to a single voter. Every ballot also undergoes strenuous signature verification to prevent voter fraud.

"We have drafted a bill which will protect the voting rights of active duty soldiers who are protecting our freedom," said State Rep. Gregory. "This bill will allow for electronic transmittal of a blank absentee ballot. The servicemen and women must then complete the

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ballot and mail the completed ballot to their clerks' office. I am certain that we will have broad bipartisan support for this bill.”

U.S. Air Force Sgt. Laura Rios, who served overseas for 12 years, including time in Iraq, said there were times her vote didn't count and it was frustrating. She thanked everyone for Operation Our Troops Count.

“I would get the ballot the day it was due – that's when I received it,” said Rios. “I want my vote to count. I want my president's vote to count. I want my Michigan vote to count. I want everything to count.”

Steve Kozera, Legislative Liaison for the Michigan National Guard said they will look closely at the legislation after it has been introduced. "The Michigan National Guard is an extraordinary organization of dedicated servicemen and women who have, and continue, to bravely serve our state and nation in fighting the war on Terrorism," Kozera said.

“The system is broken, let's fix it,” Johnson said.

Attendees included Oakland County Commissioner Shelley Taub (R-West Bloomfield), who directed the Oakland County Board of Commissioners to pass a resolution in April pushing for changes to Michigan's military system, as well as State Rep. Jon Switalski (D-Warren); Kermit Harris, Director Macomb County Dept. of Veterans Services; Garth Wootten, Supervisor, Oakland County Veterans Services; Jan Roncelli, president of the Oakland County Clerks' Association; Jack Bressler, former president of the Oak. County Veterans Group; Jerry Guest, vice president of the Oakland County Veterans Group; Dick Chatman, Public Relations Committee Chairman, Department of Michigan American Legion and Carnie Jackson, state commander of the Michigan Department of the American Legion.

The public may view the video of the press conference may be viewed at [www.macombcountymi.gov/clerksoffice/operation](http://www.macombcountymi.gov/clerksoffice/operation)

For interviews or more information, call:

- Ruth Johnson, Oakland County Clerk, at (248) 421-9676 or (248) 858-0168
- Carmella Sabaugh, Macomb County Clerk, at (586) 469-5122
- Cathy Garrett, Wayne County Clerk, at (313) 224-0536
- State Rep. Vince Gregory at (517) 373-1788.

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