

## Opening Remarks - Nicole Meek, Impacted Voter May 14, 2025

Thank you for inviting me today.

My name is Nicole Meek, and I've been an Air Force spouse for over a decade. Because of the military, we've moved 5 times, all over the US, and lived in three different states in the last three years alone.

Frequent relocations are not uncommon, but they can be hard for military families.

Anyone who's moved across the country - or internationally - knows how stressful moving can be. Now imagine doing it every few years, often with little notice. You're scrambling to find somewhere to live, transferring medical care, adjusting to new jobs and duty stations, enrolling children in schools ... all without familiarity of your new community and with limited social support..

And on top of all the things you're juggling when the military moves you, voting remains a complicated process to navigate.

I don't have the same option that my family and friends have to walk into their local polling station and cast a ballot on election day.

As a military voter, I have to plan months in advance.

- Everytime I move, I have to re-register through a specific military voter portal. Because I'm not living in my local voting district, I miss out on local media reminders about upcoming elections.
- And as a military voter, these registration deadlines are often much earlier than the standard registration deadline, so I need to be very proactive.
- Military ballots are also sent earlier than other ballots. So, it's critical that I ensure my information is updated with the county recorder by that date. If I miss these early deadlines—even by a day—I could lose my chance to vote altogether.
- Assuming I do all of this correctly, I will get my ballot early, then have to return the ballot weeks before Election day, hoping there are no mail delays and that it arrives in time to be counted.

This isn't just inconvenient. It puts military voters at a real disadvantage. So, it may come as no surprise that in 2020 (the last presidential election for which the Federal Voting Assistance Program - FVAP - has reported data to congress), military voters were 27% less likely to have voted than their civilian counterparts. According to FVAP, when a military voter tries to vote but is ultimately unsuccessful, the most common reason is because their ballot arrives past the deadline. The second most common reason is because a military voter's ballot is rejected for something like a missing signature or date, and the voter isn't notified or provided an opportunity to cure the ballot by the deadline....

These are the kinds of compounding frustrations, one of thousands of little cuts, that can cause families like mine - to rethink continuing military service. Service shouldn't mean sacrificing our right to vote.

That's why SFI, with support from our nonpartisan nonprofit community, has long advocated for policies that would tackle these top issues facing our voters.

In 2023, we consolidated a list of legislative priorities that included

- 1) Enabling ballots that are postmarked by election day to arrive at least 7 days after election day and still be counted, and
- 2) Ensuring timely ballot rejection notifications and robust ballot-curing opportunities for voters.

I got involved with SFI's nonpartisan, educational Voting Ambassador Program for military and overseas voters back in 2020, because it was already too hard for military families to vote. For years, we have been helping military voters navigate a system that is already too complicated, inconsistent, and full of barriers...

But now, the SAVE Act and the March 25th Executive Order would threaten to make things significantly worse. If implemented, these policies would disenfranchise countless service members and military-connected voters—including families like mine.

For example, requiring redundant paperwork would impose burdensome barriers on American military families who are just trying to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Decades of advocacy has resulted in robust laws governing voter registration, identification, and the transmission of ballots to voters who are military and overseas citizens. Each state has a rigorous system of checks and balances that ensures only eligible US citizens are voting.

And, given the fact that most military families move on average every 2-3 years and are often stationed far away from their home state, any requirement for documents to be submitted *in person* would be a logistical nightmare—and in many cases impossible!

We ask our service members to sacrifice everything in defense of our democracy. We should also ensure they - and their families - can participate in it. Voting is not a privilege. It is a right. And no one should lose the right to vote because of where their country sends them.

We should be working to make voting more accessible, not less. We should be honoring the sacrifice of our military families by making sure their ballots count.