FEDERAL VOTING ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1155

September 17, 2007

Honorable Eric Clark
Secretary of State
P.O Box 136
Jackson, Mississippi 39205-0136

Dear Secretary Clark,

I would like to thank you for the work you and the state of Mississippi have done over the past several years to promote and support the legislative initiatives the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) has recommended. The 2006 elections pointed out the importance of the states enacting these legislative initiatives. In particular, the provision of 45 or more days for ballot transit; electronic transmission of Federal Post Card Applications, blank ballots, and voted ballots; and, authorization for the state chief election official to implement emergency measures. States with these provisions were able to support a greater number of situations faced by our brave men and women serving in combat areas such as Iraq and Afghanistan, and other U.S. citizens worldwide. I would ask you also to consider alternative methods that these citizens could use to request their absentee ballots such as phone, email or by proxy, and utilizing digital signatures with electronically transmitted materials.

After reviewing Mississippi's existing election code and procedures, I have identified eight initiatives that the Mississippi legislature might consider during the upcoming legislative session. These initiatives are discussed in detail with suggested wording in the enclosed legislative initiatives document. If these initiatives are enacted and signed into law, they would significantly help to facilitate the absentee voting process for Mississippi's citizens covered by the *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)*. Information available to FVAP indicates that there are 11,778 Uniformed Services members, an estimated 8,834 family members and approximately 34,000 overseas citizens that claim Mississippi as their voting residence.

As you review the enclosed initiatives for possible inclusion in Mississippi's 2008 legislative agenda, please do not hesitate to contact us for assistance. We can provide legislative wording that other states have enacted to implement similar measures and provide written or in-person testimony, if desired. We have come a long way in simplifying the absentee voting process since the enactment of the *UOCAVA*—let's continue our joint efforts to achieve the simplest possible absentee voting process while maintaining its integrity.

Sincerely,

J. Scott Wiedmann
Deputy Director

Enclosure:
2008 Legislative Initiatives and Suggested Wording

Mississippi 2008 Legislative Initiatives and Sample Language

Emergency Authority for Chief Election Official

During a period of a declared emergency or other situation where a short time-frame for ballot transmission is created, it is recommended that American Samoa's **Chief Election Official have the authority to designate alternate methods for handling absentee ballots** to ensure voters have the opportunity to exercise their right to vote. The Chief Election Official and the Federal Voting Assistance Program could establish expeditious methods for handling absentee ballots including electronic transmission.

Sample Language

If a national or local emergency or other situation arises which makes substantial compliance with the provisions of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act impossible or unreasonable, such as a natural disaster or an armed conflict involving United States Armed Forces, or mobilization of those forces, including State National Guard and Reserve components
of this state, the Chief Election Official may prescribe, by emergency orders or rules, such special procedures or requirements as may be necessary to facilitate absentee voting by those citizens directly affected who otherwise are eligible to vote in the state.

The Chief Election Official shall adopt rules describing the emergency powers and the situations in which the powers will be exercised.

Notary Requirement

Current Mississippi election law requires that the affidavit on the absentee ballot return envelope must be sworn to before a commissioned officer or other person authorized to administer oaths. The notary requirement creates problems for individuals living overseas where such services are difficult and expensive, if not impossible, to obtain. Some voters have paid $90 to obtain notarial services. In many countries, there are no notaries in their system of jurisprudence. Also, some small military installations may have no commissioned officer assigned. We recommend **removal of the notary requirement for all absentee balloting materials**. Fifty states have eliminated the notary requirement on all election materials to date.

Sample Language

If a voter is residing outside the United States or is a member of the United States Uniformed Services, merchant marine, or a family member, and he or she is a qualified elector and is required to execute an affidavit or form for voter registration or an absentee ballot, he or she may subscribe to a self-administered oath, under penalty of perjury.

Return of Voted Ballot by Close of Polls on Election Day

We notice Mississippi requires some UOCAVA voters to return their voted ballot by 5:00 p.m. the day before the election. This deadline is a day earlier than the deadline for voting if these citizens were voting in person. This could present a problem, particularly for citizens stationed overseas, where mail is frequently delayed and unpredictable. In these cases, the voters need every day available to them prior to the close of polls to ensure timely return of ballots. It is for this reason we recommend Mississippi accept voted ballots from all UOCAVA citizens until the close of polls on election day.

Reference to the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) in the State Election Code

Title 23, Section 23-15-677 of the Mississippi Election Laws refers to the Federal Voting Assistance Act of 1955. In 1986, Congress updated and consolidated the provisions of the '55 Act and the Overseas Citizens Voting Rights Act of 1975 into the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA). **Reference to UOCAVA in the state election code** will help election officials and interested citizens find guidance to applicable Federal law and increase their familiarity with the statute and its application.

Sample Language

This language is usually found under the chapter in the State Election Code that makes reference to Federal elections:

It is the intent and purpose of this Legislature that the provisions set forth in this chapter are designed to facilitate the Federal mandate of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA, 42 U.S.C. 1973 ff et. seq.).

Enfranchise Citizens Who Have Never Resided in the U.S.

There are many U.S. citizens who have never resided in a state and under current law are not entitled to vote. These are usually first or second generation citizens who are subject to U.S. income tax and all other requirements of citizens. Except for the fact that they have never resided in a state, they would be eligible to vote in elections for Federal office. Some local election officials make exceptions and allow these citizens to vote. Fifteen states have passed legislation allowing these citizens to claim the legal residence of a parent. **We recommend these citizens be allowed to vote in elections for Federal offices** where either parent is eligible to vote under *UOCAVA*.

Sample Language

If a U.S. citizen outside the United States who has never lived in the United States has a parent who is a qualified elector, then that person is eligible to register and vote where his or her parent is a qualified elector.

Late Registration Procedures

We recommend that **Mississippi allow persons recently separated from the Uniformed Services or overseas employment, and their family members, to be able to register late or be exempt from registration**. Many of these citizens go through a transition period when they first leave the Uniformed Services or overseas employment and may reside in your state just prior to an election and this time frame does not meet your state's normal residency requirements. Often, the date of discharge or termination of overseas employment and a state's registration requirement combine to disenfranchise a discharged military member or overseas citizen returning home after employment abroad. Special procedures to allow these persons to register and vote would solve this problem. Twenty-nine states currently allow such procedures.

Sample Language

An individual, or accompanying family member who has been discharged or separated from the Uniformed Services, the merchant marine, or from employment outside the territorial limits of the United States, too late to enable him or her to register by the regular state deadline for registration, shall be entitled to register for the purpose of voting at the next ensuing election after such discharge, separation, or termination of employment.

State Write-In Absentee Ballot

We also recommend Mississippi provide a state write-in absentee ballot for all elections. The purpose of the state write-in absentee ballot is to **provide a method for voting by military and other persons overseas who, due to military contingencies or special circumstances such as those faced by submariners, Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries or others in remote areas, will be out of communication for extended periods of time and unable to receive the regular ballot from your state in the normal time frame**. A voter could request a state write-in absentee ballot 90 days in advance and write in the names of the candidates or party preferences. The voter knows in advance that he or she will not be able to receive, vote, and return the regular ballot from the state in time to be counted. Twenty-seven states now provide state write-in absentee ballots.

This state write-in absentee ballot should not be confused with the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB) that is prepositioned at Embassies and Consulates, military installations, overseas organizations and corporations. In comparison, the FWAB is

generally only available to military stationed overseas and overseas citizens who have already applied for a regular ballot from the state. They do not know in advance that they need the FWAB. However, if the regular ballot from the state does not arrive in sufficient time for the voter to return the voted ballot and meet the state deadline, these voters may obtain, vote, and return the FWAB to the local election official.

It is also important to note that a state write-in absentee ballot usually provides a "full" slate of offices to be voted upon including Federal, state, and local offices. On the other hand, the FWAB generally allows voting for Federal offices. There are presently 11 states that have expanded the use of the FWAB beyond Federal law. The revised FWAB was designed to accommodate its use beyond the general election and Federal offices only.

Sample Language

If the voter is a U.S. citizen residing outside the United States, or a member of the United States Uniformed Services, or merchant marine, or a family member, and a qualified elector, he or she may request, not earlier than 180 days before an election, a state write-in absentee ballot. The voter must submit with the request a statement that provides that due to military or other contingencies that preclude normal mail delivery, the elector cannot vote an absentee ballot during the normal absentee voting period. The state will make the ballot available "90 to 180" days before the election.

Expand Use of Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot

Currently the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB) may be used only in general elections for Federal offices only. This ballot is prepositioned worldwide at Embassies and Consulates, military installations and overseas organizations and corporations with American membership. By **expanding its use to include special, primary and runoff elections for Federal offices**, citizens would not be disenfranchised because regular ballots are not received in a timely manner. Frequently, there is insufficient time between the call for a special election and the actual election and between primary and runoff elections. Allowing use of the FWAB in these elections would reduce the possible need for legal action when insufficient time exists for the ballot to be received, voted and returned to be counted. During the 1996 primaries, on an *ad hoc* basis, several states and jurisdictions allowed the FWAB to be used for offices other than Federal offices. Thirteen other states have legislatively expanded its use beyond the Federal law.

In addition, for those citizens that desire to vote in elections for Federal office only, the acceptance of the FWAB voter declarations as **a request for registration simultaneously with the submission of the FWAB** would further simplify the process, improve on transit time and help ensure enfranchisement. It should be noted that the information requested on the voter declaration is basically the same as the information requested from the voter on the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA). We recommend the FWAB be accepted simultaneously as a registration form and ballot by the state for general election and Federal offices if:

(1) the information submitted complied with the state's registration requirements;

(2) the voter is otherwise eligible to vote absentee in the jurisdiction where the request is submitted;

(3) the request is received by the appropriate state election official not less than 30 days before the election or by the registration deadline established by the state.

The adoption of this initiative would save money and alleviate administrative responsibilities on the part of local election officials.

Sample Language

- Expanded use of the FWAB:

If the voter is residing outside the United States or a member of the United States Uniformed Services, merchant marine, or a family member and a qualified elector, he or she may use the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot in general, special, primary, and run-off elections for local, state and Federal offices.

- Use of FWAB as a Combined Request for Registration and Ballot Submission:

If the voter is residing outside the United States, or is a member of the United States Uniformed Services, merchant marine, or a family member, and a qualified elector, he or she may use the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB) voter declaration as a request for registration simultaneously with the submission of the FWAB if:

(1) the information submitted complies with the registration requirements of the state;

(2) the voter is otherwise eligible to vote absentee in the jurisdiction where the request is submitted; and

(3) the request is received by the appropriate state election official not less than 30 days before the election or by the registration deadline established by the state.

Acceptance of a Signature and Date on Ballot as Evidence of Time of Completion

We recommend that Mississippi **accept the signature and date on a ballot envelope as evidence of the time the ballot was completed by a [uniformed service] [or] [overseas voter] in lieu of a postmark**. Although UOCAVA voters may have voted and mailed their ballot in a timely manner, the ballot envelope may not have been postmarked on that date. By signing and dating the ballot the voter, under penalty of perjury, is certifying that their ballot was voted prior to the close of polls on election day.

Sample Language

If the voter is residing outside the United States, or is a member of the United States Uniformed Services, merchant marine, or a family member, and a qualified elector, the ballot shall be counted if it is signed and dated by the voter prior to the close of polls on election day and received by the absentee ballot deadline.