The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is a group of United States federal laws specifying the annual budget and expenditures of the U.S. Department of Defense and was first passed in 1961. Currently, the government is going through its process to finalize the NDAA for 2020. In reviewing the current draft documents that make up the 2020 NDAA, The Council of State Governments (CSG) and its Overseas Voting Initiative (OVI), a collaboration between CSG and the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP), feels there is a missed opportunity to aid the nation’s military voters in casting their ballots while they are stationed away from their homes. Currently, there is no specific mention of the OVI Military Ballot Tracking Pilot in the NDAA documents. While the act is in conference committee, there is still a chance to ensure that the NDAA serves our overseas military citizens by implementing the Military Ballot Tracking Pilot program.

In 2016, CSG, the United States Postal Service (USPS), the Military Postal Service (MPSA), and the Federal Voting Assistance Program teamed up on the Military Ballot Tracking Pilot, an innovative project through the OVI to provide full visibility to military ballots heading our military personnel serving overseas. This idea culminates from the desire to provide total customer service for the nation’s military personnel serving abroad and the goal to provide a more accurate picture of the postal trail of military ballots as they travel overseas, are completed by military personnel, and then make their return trip to their respective local election office in the U.S. for tabulation.

The development and implementation of the Military Ballot Tracking Pilot program required a deep level of coordination between CSG, the U.S. Postal Service, the Military Postal Service, and FVAP.

The goals of the ballot tracking program were to:

- Examine the feasibility of providing a full life cycle tracking of ballots to and from military personnel serving overseas to increase customer service and visibility; and
- Improve data collection to facilitate the identification of any systemic problems with the mailing of balloting materials to military personnel serving overseas.

Through the MBTP program, in conjunction with the United States Postal Service and the Military Postal Service Agency, the OVI tracked ballots at all points in their life cycle: from the time they left the local election official’s office, to delivery to the Military Post Office, to delivery to the voter overseas, to their delivery back to the local election office.

Through the MBTP, mail ballots for military voters is six local jurisdictions across four states were tracked during the 2016 general election as follows:

- San Diego County, California
- Denver (city and county), Colorado
- Escambia County, Florida
- Harris County, Texas
The Military Ballot Tracking Pilot evaluation included analysis of transactional data furnished by these participating local election official jurisdictions, parcel scan data furnished from Military Postal Service Agency and U.S. Postal Service, technical feedback from the pilot’s principal stakeholders, and the six participating local election jurisdictions. A customer satisfaction survey of voters who were afforded this tracking service was also evaluated.

The Military Ballot Tracking Pilot’s findings include:

- An estimated 85-90% of all ballots were successfully delivered to destination MPOs.
- Variability of the application of parcel scans within the USPS and Military Postal Service postal systems led to less definitive conclusions and illustrates the need for greater business processing improvement.
- Ninety-eight percent of all overseas Active Duty Military voters were satisfied or very satisfied with the conduct of the MBTP.
- The average period for ballots to be transmitted and returned from theaters of operation (e.g., Europe or Asia) were substantially the same, though units in Europe were slightly more likely to receive final delivery scans.
- The MPS met the seven-day service level target, with average return time of four days.

S. 1790 of the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2020 [2] does not address ballot tracking or the Military Ballot Tracking Pilot (MBTP) at all. Sec 575, Subtitle H of H.R. 2500 [3] offers only “absentee ballot tracking program” for its language on ballot tracking. While this sounds on target, it is merely an amendment to the existing language that maintains the status quo. The language only enables tracking for ballots based on existing infrastructure and domestic mail tracking capabilities and does not utilize the more extensive tracking capabilities of the MBTP. It does not aid our voters covered under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act by addressing the key value propositions of the Military Ballot Tracking Pilot, which enable the specific tracking of military ballots going overseas and returning to election offices across the U.S. The MBTP provides improved customer service to our military voters and better data to quantify overall ballot delivery success in order to further explore how to integrate this level of service nationally.

Unless Congress specifically replicates the processes that were established by the MBTP—cooperation between Military Postal Service Agency, U.S. Postal Service and FVAP—any value will be lost for overseas military voters. The program authorized in the National Defense Authorization Act would put the onus on the states to track the ballots, which would result in states relying on USPS tracking data. For our overseas military service members, this prevents any updates during the ballot’s travel overseas. Additionally, the USPS business and tracking process is not nearly as inclusive as the tracking process established by the MBTP. Moreover, the data provided by the MBTP is much a more holistic view. The data would better inform states on the absentee voting process and we could eventually integrate this level of service nationally.

Including the OVI’s MBTP program in the 2020 NDAA is a missed opportunity by Congress to further serve our nation’s military voters and the election officials who serve them.

For more information on the Military Ballot Tracking Pilot, see the Overseas Voting Initiative’s report on this program here: https://www.csg.org/OVI/documents/Dispelling_Myths.pdf [4].