

Government Accountability Board

State of Wisconsin

212 E. Washington Ave., Third Floor • Madison, WI 53703 • gab@wi.gov • (608) 266-8005 • Help Desk (608) 261-2028 • <http://gab.wi.gov>

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
January 29, 2014

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:
Reid Magney, 608-267-7887

G.A.B. Director Testifies before U.S. Senate Committee on Military and Overseas Voting Rights Bill

MADISON, WI – Wisconsin’s chief election official testified Wednesday morning before the U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration regarding the SENTRI Act, which would provide additional protections to military and overseas voters.

“A citizen’s right to vote is one of our enduring principles,” said Kevin Kennedy, director and general counsel of the Government Accountability Board. “Our uniformed services and overseas voters make extreme sacrifices to protect that right for us. They deserve the commitment and effort of all public officials to enable them to fully participate in the electoral process.”

Kennedy testified that the SENTRI Act (Safeguarding Elections for our Nation’s Troops through Reforms and Improvements) makes a number of reforms and improvements to safeguard elections for uniformed services and overseas voters. “The spirit behind these reforms and improvements is commendable and has the support of state election officials. However, implementation of some aspects of these reforms and improvements, while not insurmountable, could be problematic,” he said.

Specific issues in the bill that need to be addressed include:

- Extending deadlines for local and state officials to report to the Department of Defense on the numbers of military and overseas ballots.
- Ensuring that new Department of Defense online resources for military voters integrate well with existing tools and do not create confusion.
- Ensuring the privacy of military and overseas voters.

The SENTRI Act requires very tight deadlines for reporting on when military and overseas absentee ballots were mailed or transmitted to voters. Kennedy told the committee that this is particularly challenging for a state where the municipal election officials are responsible for fulfilling military and overseas absentee ballot requests.

“Wisconsin experienced this problem in 2012,” Kennedy noted. “A handful of our 1,852 municipalities failed to transmit a small number of military and overseas ballots before the April Presidential primary. As part of an agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice, Wisconsin collected extensive data similar to what is required by the SENTRI Act for the partisan primary and general election and provided detailed reports to Justice. The G.A.B. devoted almost 2,000

staff hours fulfilling this requirement. Because of the efforts of the G.A.B. and local election officials, all of the late ballots were received before Election Day.”

A copy of Kennedy’s prepared testimony is available on the G.A.B. website:
<http://gab.wi.gov/publications/other/us-senate-committee-testimony-01-29-2014>.

Kennedy was invited to testify by the committee’s Republican members, and accepted the invitation after consulting with G.A.B. Chair Thomas Barland. Kennedy served as president of the National Association of State Election Directors in 2006 and currently serves on the NASED executive committee. He has been Wisconsin’s non-partisan chief election official for more than 30 years.

The Government Accountability Board is proud of the service Wisconsin election officials provide to our military and overseas voters. The Board works with municipal clerks to enable military and overseas voters to participate fully in Wisconsin elections. The municipal clerk keeps a current list of all military and overseas voters. In cooperation with the county clerks, municipal clerks also track the status of all absentee ballots for military and overseas voters using the G.A.B.’s Statewide Voter Registration System (SVRS).

In 2011, at the request of the G.A.B., the Legislature changed the Partisan Primary date from September to August to comply with the federal Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act and ensure that these voters have enough time to get their ballots back home to be counted. Federal law requires a minimum of 45 days, and state law now requires 47 days.

In addition to receiving ballots directly from clerks, many of the military and overseas voters receive their ballots online through the G.A.B.’s My Vote Wisconsin website (<http://myvote.wi.gov>), which was launched in September 2012 with the assistance of a \$1.9 million grant from the Department of Defense’s Federal Voting Assistance Program.

Over the years, Wisconsin has been nationally recognized for its efforts to ensure that military and overseas voters can fully participate in Wisconsin elections. Before passage of the MOVE Act, the PEW Center on the States in its seminal work on military and overseas voting gave Wisconsin its highest rating. This study, which identified problems in other states, helped inspire passage of the MOVE Act.

###

The Government Accountability Board is responsible for administration and enforcement of campaign finance, elections, ethics and lobbying laws in Wisconsin. The Board is made up of six non-partisan, former judges and is supported by an agency of non-partisan staff members.