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- PRESS RELEASE -

MERRILL SEES DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENT IN VOTING PARTICIPATION OF CONNECTICUT MILITARY PERSONNEL

IN REPORT TO CT GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON WAYS TO IMPROVE OVERSEAS
MILITARY VOTING, SECRETARY OF THE STATE REPORTS 94% OF ABSENTEE
BALLOTS REQUESTED BY MILITARY VOTERS RETURNED IN TIME TO BE
COUNTED IN 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

HARTFORD: Secretary of the State Denise Merrill today released a report submitted to the Connecticut General Assembly detailing ways to improve voting for military voters stationed overseas. In the report, Secretary Merrill noted a dramatic improvement in the voter participation by absentee ballot of men and women in uniform serving abroad during the 2012 presidential election, the latest year for which statistics are available. During the 2012 Presidential election, some 94% of absentee ballots requested by Connecticut military personnel serving overseas were returned in time to be counted by election day, a nearly 30% improvement over the same numbers for the 2010 state and federal election. The statistics are contained in the report submitted January 1, 2014 to members of the Connecticut General Assembly committees on Government Administration and Elections, and Veterans' Affairs. Secretary Merrill was required to submit the report and select a method for more timely return of military ballots by Public Act No. 13-185 "An Act Concerning Voting by Members of the Military Serving Overseas," enacted in 2013 by the General Assembly and Governor Dannel P. Malloy.

"For years, delays in the military postal service meant many absentee ballots cast by our brave men and women in uniform serving our country overseas would not arrive in time to be counted on election day," said Secretary Merrill, Connecticut's chief elections official. "These logistical delays in effect disenfranchised the very people who put their lives on the line overseas to defend our right to vote. The great news is that since Congress and the states implemented the federal MOVE act allowing electronic transfer of absentee ballots and applications in 2010, Connecticut has seen a huge improvement in the number of military overseas ballots returned in time for Election Day. In 2012 we saw more than 94% of absentee ballots requested by overseas service members returned in time to be counted for the election, a substantially higher percentage than in 2010."

In her report, Secretary Merrill cites statistics from the federal Elections Assistance Commission (EAC) revealing that in 2010 Connecticut transmitted 408 ballots to military voters and received 249 in return, for a response rate of 61%. However, in 2012 the EAC report states that Connecticut transmitted 3,829 ballots to military voters and received 3,602 in return, for a response rate of 94%. The federal Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act, passed in 2009 and implemented in Connecticut in 2010, permitted military personnel serving overseas to electronically obtain and submit applications for absentee ballots, and the law required states to adopt ways to electronically transmit blank absentee ballots to overseas military voters. This cut mail delays in returning absentee ballots by nearly one month, resulting in the higher percentage of military ballots counted from service members stationed overseas.

Secretary Merrill also recommends that lawmakers consider establishing a statewide online platform for military personnel or family members to securely download a complete electronic version of a town absentee ballot that is available for all voters, with candidates for all offices appearing on the ballot. Those ballots could then be downloaded from a town website, printed, filled out, and sent back to town clerks via regular mail. In the report, Merrill says such a system is preferable to allowing military voters to fax ballots to town offices or the Secretary of the State's office, citing potential violations of the state constitution's guarantee of a private ballot for every voter. Electronic delivery systems for completed absentee ballots, either through web upload, fax, or as an email attachment still pose serious security concerns related to ballot tampering and internet hacking, and are not recommended.

Secretary Merrill estimates that the cost of establishing downloadable absentee ballots for military voters statewide would be an initial state investment of at least \$250,000 with additional costs for municipalities. But such a system could have additional benefits, such as notifying a voter via email when their absentee ballot is ready to be downloaded and allow local town clerks to keep better track of military absentee ballots issued and returned.

Secretary Merrill added, "It should be of paramount importance to us as election administrators to make sure the men and women who wear a uniform in the military and sacrifice time away from their families to defend all of us should have their votes count. However, we should also be careful not to sacrifice the security or integrity of that vote just in the name of saving time. We should strive to strike a balance that both takes advantage of the benefits offered by modern technology so military personnel overseas can cast their ballots securely and privately, the same as any Connecticut Voter."

A full version of Secretary Merrill's report on improving voting for overseas military personnel from Connecticut is attached to the end of this news release.