Overseas voting project scheduled for Nov. election

FSU teams up to help make voting overseas more reliableFSU teams up to help make voting overseas more reliable

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Absentee voting is on its way to becoming easier for overseas voters as the Operation BRAVO (Bring Remote Access to Voters Overseas) Foundation has recently announced its partnership with the Okaloosa County Supervisor of Elections and the SAIT (the Security and Assurance in Information Technology) Laboratory at Florida State University. The partnership's objective is to conduct the Okaloosa Distance Balloting Project (ODBP) during the upcoming Nov. 4, 2008 general election.

"We are very pleased to work with (the team) in Okaloosa County and the excellent team that they have put together to provide these citizens greater opportunity to exercise their right to vote," said Alec Yasinsac, lead investigator of the SAIT Lab and national expert on electronic voting system software.

According to the SAIT Web site, "overseas voters traditionally cast ballots in far lower percentages than their stateside counterparts."

This may be due to many different factors including mail delay, high mobility rates of overseas voters, foreign mail service integration and other factors that often lead to failed voting attempts and discouragement among voters.

By placing voting kiosks in three overseas locations, the ODBP experiment will establish a more secure distance balloting environment for about 900 American self-selecting voters in various countries overseas.

The voting kiosks will use a type of transparent and reliable remote paper, along with electronic balloting tools, platforms and methodologies provided by Election Trust LLC, a Seattle-based election solutions integrator and consultancy.

These kiosks will be operated under the management of the Okaloosa County Supervisor of Elections, Pat Hollarn, who is also a director of the Operation BRAVO Foundation.

Each location, which is determined by their proximity to Okaloosa voters based at military installations in Germany, the U.K., and Japan, will be manned by election officials and connected to a secure Virtual Private Network (VPN), which will be reinforced by FSU's SAIT Lab.

The job of the lab is to bring knowledge and experience to the partnership through its background in information technology and secure voting solutions.

"SAIT Lab is pleased and humbled to be able to participate in this important project," said Yasinsac. "Overseas voters, and particularly, our military, federal employees and civilians working overseas as federal contractors, are often making substantial sacrifices and accepting great risk to serve our country. Yet, they have been at a great disadvantage in participating in the political system that they serve and defend."

Florida State University's SAIT Lab is certified by the U.S. National Security Agency as a Center of Academic Excellence in Information Assurance Education. They are not receiving, nor seeking, any funding for this project.

"Academia has a responsibility to reach out to the community where there is opportunity and we all have a responsibility for public service," said Yasinsac. "The (ODBP) provides an outstanding technological challenge where academic ideas and applied research can make a difference in this real world project."

The Operation BRAVO Foundation's mission is to develop and explore innovative alternatives to significantly improve the overseas absentee voting process.

"This is a monumental step in the right direction," said Carol Paquette, a former BRAVO project manager for the electronic voting projects by the Federal Voting Assistance Program in the 2000 and 2004 elections and a current BRAVO Director. "Overseas voters have been left without a reliable voting method for far too long."

For more information on Florida State's SAIT lab, visit their Web site at www.sait.fsu.edu/news/2007-11-07-bravo.shtml. Information on the BRAVO Foundation can be found at www.operationbravo.org/.