

Jonathan Townes
The Andrew Goodman Foundation, *Student Ambassador*
Testimony for SB647
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
Thursday, Feb. 20th, 2020
Election Law – Institutions of Higher Education – Voter Registration and Voting by Students
(Student Voter Empowerment Act of 2020)

POSITION: FAVORABLE

Honorable Chair Paul Pinsky and esteemed members of the Committee:

My Name is Jonathan Townes. I am a Junior at Towson University studying Political Science. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Senator Lam for introducing this bill, I believe it has the potential to change the lives and experience of many students in Maryland higher education. I have the privilege of serving as a Student Ambassador for the Andrew Goodman Foundations VoteEverywhere initiative. As an AGF Ambassador, It has been my duty to promote civic engagement and social responsibility at Towson University. Towson's AGF team, myself, and our many allies have worked tirelessly to increase voter participation and registration amongst the student body at Towson University.

According to Towson University's National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, the number of TU students participating in the midterm election nearly doubled from 20.7% in 2014 to 42.2% in 2018. We have also seen incredible voter registration rates, with 85.6% of all Towson University Students being registered to vote in the 2018 midterm election. The civic engagement success we have experienced at TU did not happen overnight. It is the culmination of many years of hard work, dedication, and compromise. It has not been easy. Overcoming the barriers that prevent students from participating in our electoral process has been something we at Towson University and others at different institutions have struggled with.

Before the passage of legislation in our Student Government Association, there were no policies written pertaining to excused absences for election day. Students were in effect being punished for exercising their constitutional right as citizens of the United States. We saw this as unacceptable. That is why we have worked tirelessly to pass legislation in our SGA that would remove that obstacle and designate election day as a campus holiday. This bill passed unanimously within our SGA, showing that we at Towson take our constitutional rights very seriously.

Before attending Towson, I grew up in the concrete jungles of Baltimore City. Since I was young, my parents taught me the importance of being involved in my community. They told stories of the many people who have fought and died for the rights that I am fighting for today. This is one of the many reasons why I became interested in becoming an Andrew Goodman Foundation Ambassador. This bill is very important because we live in a time where voting rights are not being expanded, rather they are being curtailed. I believe it is important that we take every step necessary to increase voter participation. The easiest way to do that is by making voter registration and civic engagement as simple and accessible as possible.

Voting serves as a building block to a more active civic life. Numerous studies have illustrated that voting is habit-forming, and young people who vote are more likely to become life-long voters. Universities serve to prepare us for life in the real world and as such, It is vital

for the survival of our republic that we have as many individuals informed and participating in the electoral process as possible.

Our state should take this opportunity to step up and be a national leader on the defense of our democracy. We now have to opportunity to make voting easier for all university students in Maryland. This is something that cannot wait another second.

For all these reasons, we support SB647 and urge a favorable report.

Thank You,

Jonathan Townes
Student Ambassador, The Andrew Goodman Foundation