

HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

January 28, 2025

HB 201 – Election Law – Absentee Ballot Application – Sending to Eligible Voters Before Primary Elections

Position: SUPPORT

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is the Protection & Advocacy agency in Maryland, federally mandated to advance the civil rights of people with disabilities. DRM works to increase opportunities for Marylanders with disabilities to be part of their communities through voting by advocating for equal access to the ballot box.

DRM strongly supports HB 201, which requires each local board of elections to send absentee ballot applications to eligible voters in advance of each statewide primary election. The absentee, or mail-in voting method, increases voter participation by providing a more accessible and standardized way to cast a ballot. This bill will provide critical support for individuals with disabilities and expand their ability to exercise their fundamental voting rights.

Over the past few election cycles, the number of voters with disabilities has steadily increased as access to the ballot box continues to expand. According to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 62% of individuals with disabilities turned out to vote in 2020, a notable increase from the 56% who voted in 2016.¹ Although data from the 2024 election is not yet available, the Rutgers Program for Disability Research projected that approximately 40.2 million individuals with disabilities were eligible to vote in the presidential election, . This figure represents about one-sixth of the total electorate. Additionally, nearly one-third of voters either have a disability themselves or live with a household member who has a disability, underscoring the significant role that voters with disabilities play in shaping the electorate.²

¹ <https://www.eac.gov/news/2021/07/07/new-data-177-million-americans-disabilities-voted-2020-significant-increase-over>.

² https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/Program_Disability_Research/Disability_Electorate_Projections_Report_Oct2024.pdf.

These statistics highlight the growing importance of individuals with disabilities—and their families—in shaping our democracy. Strengthening voting access will continue to encourage greater participation among all Americans. Furthermore, given that mobility impairments are the most common type of disability among voters, it is crucial to expand support for voting options that do not solely require physical access to polling locations. Doing so will help ensure that voters with disabilities are not excluded from participating fully and equally in the electoral process.

By notifying registered voters of their ability to vote using the mail in ballot method, local boards of election play a critical role in increasing awareness of this voting option. For individuals who may have been unaware of mail-in voting, this notice serves as an introduction to the process. Additionally, it acts as a reminder for all registered voters that they have the option to vote by mail. This added awareness is particularly vital for individuals with disabilities, who sometimes require more time than others to gather the necessary information and complete the mail-in ballot registration process.

Before the passage of the Help America Vote Act in 2000, voter turnout among individuals with disabilities lagged nearly 17% behind that of their nondisabled peers. By 2020, this gap had narrowed to 11%,³ demonstrating the progress made in enhancing accessibility and empowering individuals with disabilities to participate in the electoral process. However, more work remains to ensure that all eligible voters can fully exercise their rights. This bill not only removes barriers to the ballot box but also promotes greater awareness of voting rights and accessible voting options. By doing so, it strengthens our democracy and fosters a more inclusive and equitable electoral system.

For these reasons, we request a favorable report on House Bill 201. Please feel free to contact me with any questions at 410-929-6859 or BradenS@DisabilityRightsMD.org.

Respectfully submitted,

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Disability Rights Maryland

³ <https://adasoutheast.org/elections-have-gotten-more-accessible-for-disabled-voters-but-gaps-remain/>