

Dēmos

Testimony on SB 372
Election Law-Correctional Facilities-Voter Registration and Voting
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

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Position: Favorable

My name is Amshula Jayaram and I am a Senior Campaign Strategist with Dēmos, a national racial and economic justice organization dedicated to the emancipation of black and brown communities. Dēmos is submitting testimony in enthusiastic support of Senate Bill 372, which requires the State Board of Elections and the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services to work together to ensure that eligible incarcerated individuals are able to vote.

Dēmos takes its name from the Greek word for “the people.” We chose this name as a reminder that the strength of any democratic society is dependent on the power and freedom of the people, central to which is the ability to vote.

Senate Bill 372 is a straightforward but necessary bill that would ensure that the state of Maryland is upholding basic constitutional rights. For those detained pretrial or convicted of a misdemeanor, this means they must be given access to registration and absentee ballots. For those who are being released, they must be informed of their voting rights and how to exercise that right. Democracy is not a spectator sport, neither for voters nor for the State. It requires all of us to ensure that it is working as intended.

Senate Bill 372 will not only strengthen democracy in Maryland, but it will set an example for states around the country. While the nation has begun to reckon with mass incarceration and the disproportionate impact on communities of color, we are nowhere near addressing the many collateral consequences, one of the most serious of which is the loss of political power for black and brown communities. Creating a strong voter engagement program to ensure that those detained pre-trial who have the presumption of innocence, those who have been convicted of misdemeanors, and those who are approaching release are all aware of their right to vote and able to exercise it sends a message that the state is committed to chipping away at those consequences.

For many impacted people, the day of detention – even if temporary – may be one of the worst days of their lives. While it may not occur to those of us who have not gone through the criminal legal system, something as powerful as the ability to vote sends a message that life is not over because of a charge or a conviction. The shame and stigma of incarceration is equally strong in many communities, and here again the ability to engage in civic life can potentially help people in the system retain a sense of their value in the world.

Saying voting is a fundamental right means nothing without the infrastructure to ensure people can exercise that right. This legislation is a critical step towards making that right a reality. We urge the committee to issue a favorable report and applaud the legislature for taking this step.