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*Legislative District 30*  
Anne Arundel County

Budget and Taxation Committee

*Subcommittees*

Education, Business and Administration

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Joint Committee on Administrative,  
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Joint Committee on the Chesapeake and  
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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

February 4, 2021

**Testimony in Favor of SB0283**  
**Student and Military Voter Empowerment Act**

Chairman Pinsky, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,

I respectfully request a favorable report of Senate Bill 283, the Student and Military Voter Empowerment Act. This legislation would ensure that active duty service members and college students are able to more easily cast their ballots and ensure that anyone living in large residential institutions, such as senior living facilities and military installations, are properly incorporated into the discussion of precinct boundary decisions by the State Board of Elections (SBE).

This Committee will recall that last session there was similar legislation, sponsored by Senator Lam, was introduced and heard last year. That legislation was focused solely on ensuring that our college students have the tools necessary to partake in their civic duty. While that legislation did not pass, both the House sponsor and I heard the feedback of this Committee, went back to the drawing table, and today present you with an improved and more comprehensive bill.

Additionally, when rewriting the legislation from last session, we took an opportunity to include other groups besides college students that could benefit from increased support in their pursuit of voting -- including active duty service members and those living in large residential institutions such as military installations, continuing care retirement communities, and large senior living facilities.

**For college students:** this legislation will require institutions to designate a staff person as a "student voting coordinator" and require that coordinator to develop and implement a student voting plan to expand civic engagement. This student voting plan will have critical information on how a student can cast their ballot and, amongst other important measures, require a policy for excused absence for voting of no more than 2 hours. Lastly, there will be reporting measures in place to ensure that institutions are doing as much as possible to expand voting access to college students.

According to Tufts University, only 48% of college students voted in the 2016 election, a significantly lower rate than the 61% national average for all Americans. In the 2014 midterm election, only 13% of college students ages 18-24 voted. While voting rates increased in the 2018 midterm election, to 40%, that rate was still 10 percentage points lower than the average for all Americans. This Committee knows that

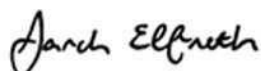
voting is also habit-forming: people who vote at early ages develop the lifelong habit of voting<sup>1</sup>. It is critical that this body create policies to increase voter participation, and thus a habit of lifelong voting, in young Marylanders.

**For active duty service members:** this legislation will make two primary policy changes: first, the bill requires SBE to develop a process for the electronic submission of the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA); second, the bill allows the active duty service member to use their federally issued common access card to be used to sign the electronic application. The FPCA is the form that service members must mail to SBE in order to apply for and receive an absentee ballot to vote, and in creating a process that allows for this form to be digitally submitted we would allow for more men and women serving to request their ballot when they otherwise would not be able to because of lack of mailing services or timing. These important policy recommendations came at the suggestion of Delegate Mike Griffith.

**For those living in large residential institutions:** this legislation requires that local election boards seek and obtain input from large residential institutions when undergoing the process of determining precinct boundaries and determining the locations of polling sites. In doing this we will ensure that the residents of these facilities have a voice at the table and are a part of the process -- in turn the residents of these facilities will have a better ability to vote. This policy change is a balanced approach to legislation this Committee heard last year.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not mention that this bill almost makes my career feel as though it has come full circle. Fourteen years ago I came to this Committee as a college student and member of the Student Government at Towson University to testify on a bill that would have increased access for students to vote. It's a story I tell on the campaign trail and - frankly - is a little more colorful than I am comfortable sharing before this Committee. But the gist of it is that participation - whether voting or testifying before this very Committee - is an important life value and practice that we should work to instill in all citizens, particularly young people. In my case, it turned out pretty well.

Sincerely,



Sarah Elfreth

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<sup>1</sup> <https://idhe.tufts.edu/why-college-student-voting-matters>