LWV LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®
OF MARYLAND

TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION, HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

SB 738 – Secure Elections Act of 2022

POSITION: Informational Only

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The League of Women Voters of Maryland, a nonpartisan organization with 1500 members, supports offering all registered voters the option of voting by mail (absentee) so long as best practices are followed. As this choice becomes increasingly popular across the state, we recognize that the issue of signature verification must be addressed.

There are many technical, fiscal, political, and social factors to consider when planning a system that all Marylanders will perceive as effective yet fair. Here are some of the most important:

Successful implementation will entail a significant statewide investment in equipment and training for the local Boards of Elections. In states and counties elsewhere that perform signature verification, specially trained verification judges make final decisions, though automated verification is employed (if legally authorized) when warranted by the quantity of ballots. The major manufacturers of election hardware, including ES&S and Runbeck, all rely on the same signature recognition software with a reputation for being efficient and robust. Ballots can be sorted into yes/no/maybe groups based on their "similarity score" to digitized images already on file.

However, according to the vendors, such automation is only cost-justifiable when mail-in ballot volumes are regularly 50,000 or more, because the bulky sorting equipment can run to $100,000. Yet under Maryland law, all jurisdictions are required to have a uniform election process. Equipment that might be very useful in the largest counties would be unnecessary and unaffordable for the less populous ones. How will this be resolved?

Changing our voting process to include this new element will require intensive voter education and outreach. Many Marylanders who prefer absentee voting, including the elderly and those with disabilities, have legitimate concerns about the impact of signature verification on their ability to cast a ballot. What accommodations will be made to ensure accessibility?

We strongly recommend **establishing a workgroup to study signature verification** for mail-in ballots. Such a workgroup should include bipartisan members of the legislature and selected staff, Board of Elections officials, advocates for the disabled and for minority populations, and other appropriate participants. The group could recommend procedures for signature recognition as well as guidelines for equipment procurement.

The League of Women Voters of Maryland urges the committee to take this information into consideration when evaluating SB 738.