



Empowerment. Integration. Equality.

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www.DisabilityRightsMD.org

WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

March 2, 2022

HB 963 – Election Law – Absentee Ballots – Signature Verification and Verification Statements and Unsigned Ballot Statements

Position: OPPOSE

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM – formerly Maryland Disability Law Center) is the Protection & Advocacy agency in Maryland, 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 and equitable access to the ballot.

DRM **opposes** HB 963 which establishes a signature verification process and establishes the grounds a local board of elections can reject an absentee ballot due to an unverified signature. Voting is a fundamental right guaranteed to every citizen of the United States, however historically, certain groups have been excluded and disenfranchised from voting through a series of laws, regulations, and practices such as signature verification laws. Voters of color, women and voters with disabilities particularly have had their right to vote threatened, removed, or unrealized due to legislation such as HB 963 that place excessive requirements on the voter to have their signature match their registration record.

Voters with disabilities will bear an undue and unfair burden that threatens their access to voting if the signature verification process outlined in HB 963 is enacted in Maryland. Signatures change and develop with time, and it is arbitrary and punitive to reject a whole ballot because a signature doesn't match to a voter's registration record. For voters with disabilities, they may have had assistance with their signature when registering and could possibly be different on an absentee ballot. Also consider voters with disabilities who have difficulty holding a pen to sign, or low vision and blind voters who cannot see to sign an absentee ballot. Additionally, the provisions to return a signature verification statement to their local board of elections within two days of receiving notice is too quick of a turnaround, especially for voters with disabilities. Voters with disabilities may have people assisting them that requires coordination with advance notice to ensure the individuals they are assisting can complete their daily tasks. Requiring the signature verification form to be returned in two days places an undue and unfair burden on voters with disabilities or possibly have their ballot rejected. Voters with disabilities are already less likely to vote than their non-disabled counterparts. No excuse absentee ballots is an effective way for some people with disabilities to carry out their civic duty. Placing restrictive barriers like HB 963 on absentee ballots will disproportionately effect access and participation for voters with disabilities in the electoral process where their participation is vital for our democracy.

For these reasons DRM urges an **unfavorable** report on **HB 963**.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at samuelaa@disabilityrightsmd.org, or by phone at 443-356-6304



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