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WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

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HB 1089 – Election Law - Registered Voter List Security and Electronic Signature Requirements for Petitions

Position: SUPPORT

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 equal and clear access to the ballot by advocating for eliminating and reducing barriers to voting for people with disabilities.

DRM **supports** HB 1089 which will allow electronic signatures for ballot petitions. The State Board of Elections allowed electronic signatures to be accepted for ballot petitions from 2020-2021 as a response to the coronavirus pandemic. However, the State Board of Elections will revert back to handwritten ink petitions, which places barriers on voters with disabilities, particularly those with low vision or blind voters and other physical disabilities who can have a difficult time providing physical handwritten signatures. HB 1089 will make electronic signatures for ballot petitions a permanent solution for voters who have difficulties with providing a handwritten signature on ballot petitions.

Currently, ballot petitions require 10,000 physical handwritten signatures prior to allowing the petition to be on a ballot. Voters with disabilities required to sign petitions experience challenges providing a handwritten signature for several reasons related to their disability, especially visually impaired voters and voters who have difficulty holding a writing instrument. Only allowing physical handwritten signatures excludes voters who cannot provide a physical signature from participating fully in their local political and electoral process which is effectively silencing a whole community whose input is invaluable and necessary. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act requires that states, counties and local governments provide accommodations to allow people with disabilities full participation in the services, programs and activities they provide. Making electronic signatures a permanent fixture of ballot petitions is a reasonable accommodation for voters with disabilities which allows them full, equal, and clear participation in the electoral process.

Not only would this benefit voters with disabilities, but all voters as the pandemic required all of us to find new and innovative ways to connect through technology. Electronic signatures should remain a permanent fixture for ballot petitions. For these reasons DRM urges a **favorable** report on **HB 1089**.

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