

Good afternoon Chair and Members of the Committee.

My name is Dana Vickers Shelley, and I am Executive Director of the ACLU of Maryland. But I speak today in my personal capacity as a Black Baltimore County resident and voter supporting the Maryland Voting Rights Act. Strong voting rights enforcement is needed now more than ever, given the perilous moment our democracy faces today.

I have heard it asked why Maryland, a progressive state, needs its own voting rights act. Black and BIPOC residents of Baltimore County like me have no difficulty explaining why. Baltimore County is one of many places in our state with a record of locking Black and Brown people out of representative government – a problem that continues today.

Consider this: BIPOC residents now make up 47 percent of Baltimore County's population, an increase from 25 percent in 2000 and 35 percent in 2010. But despite this growth, in 2022 the County enacted a racially gerrymandered redistricting plan that heavily packed Black voters into a single County Council district to maintain significant white majorities in six of the seven Council districts.

The County did this despite enormous public outcry and repeated warnings that its gerrymandered plan violated the federal Voting Rights Act. This led Black voters and advocates, myself among them, to file a federal lawsuit challenging the redistricting plan as racially discriminatory; the judge concluded the County's plan was indeed discriminatory and required the County to reconfigure the plan to make it more fair. Still, the County resisted, doing the bare minimum to expand opportunities for Black voters; As a result, Black County voters still are not fairly represented – with only one Black Council member among the seven.

One of the things a Maryland VRA would do is alleviate the need for costly and time-consuming federal litigation, through resources offered by our state Attorney General through a new "preclearance" process. Through this process, major changes like redistricting in covered jurisdictions would be submitted to the Attorney General for review before they take effect. Had that process been in place last year, the AG would have flagged the legal problem with the County plan before it took effect – saving everyone both the emotional stress of litigation, and hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars in legal fees.

Baltimore County is not the only jurisdiction in Maryland that falls short in providing equal voting opportunities for Black and Brown residents. A Maryland Voting Rights Act can bring us closer to changing that, and will help our state become the national model of democracy we all long for it to be.

For these reasons, I urge a favorable report on SB 878.

