



HB645- Electronic Ballot Return System - Study and Request for Proposals

Support

Testimony of Maryland Centers for Independent Living

House Ways and Means, February 28, 2023

The seven Centers for Independent Living (CIL) were established by federal law and work to ensure the civil rights and quality services of people with disabilities in Maryland. Centers for Independent Living are nonprofit disability resource and advocacy organizations located throughout Maryland operated by and for people with disabilities. CIL staff and Boards are at least 51% people with disabilities. We are part of a nationwide network which provides Information and Referral, Advocacy, Peer Support, Independent Living Skills training, and Transition Services.

The current system for Vote by Mail strips the right from individuals with disabilities to vote privately and independently. The mailing system is extremely unreliable because of the time it takes for the election board to receive the information. Their vote may never be received and may never be counted. People with print disabilities must return their ballot at the cost of losing privacy and ballot secrecy. The ballot can be marked online accessibly but must be printed and signed before it can be sent by mail or dropped in a ballot box. They require assistance from another person in finding where to sign their ballot and preparing it for delivery by mail or by drop box. Those who assist them are able to see for whom the voter voted, which is inconsistent with voter privacy and independence principles. The voter must coordinate transportation to a drop box, which places undue burden on the voter.

The Maryland Centers for Independent Living support electronic ballot return because it would remove transportation and accessibility barriers by transmitting the ballot to the Board of Elections. The Board of Elections would still process the ballots in the same way they process those coming through the mail, but the burden would not be on the disabled voter to get the ballot there or to interact with the document in an inaccessible way. Many states are currently exploring electronic ballot return procedures and election security experts are confident there are secure platforms that are not vulnerable to hacking. Other groups, such as voters overseas and military personnel, would benefit from electronic ballot return, which would diversify the voter groups using this method and make the ballots of individuals less identifiable.

The Maryland Centers for Independent Living ask the Maryland General Assembly to ensure mail in voting is accessible and private for all people with disabilities. The Centers support

survey efforts to determine if and how electronic ballot return can be implemented in Maryland.

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