

WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE**March 3, 2023****HB 1112– Election Law - Registered Voter List and Petitions (Ballot Petition
Modernization Act)****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. Our mission is to advance the civil rights of persons with disabilities. We work to ensure that people with disabilities are able to fully participate in civic life, including the electoral process.

As an emergency measure under the state of emergency of the pandemic, the State Board of Elections allowed for electronic ballot petition signatures to mitigate effects of the pandemic. However, once the state of emergency was recalled, the State Board of Elections rescinded the policy of allowing for electronic ballot petition signatures and requires print or wet signatures from all petition signers. This requirement greatly affects voters with disabilities who may need accommodations in physically signing petitions.

Ballot petitions are one of the few ways individuals can mobilize and perform grassroots activism to affect their local communities. Organizations and candidates use ballot petitions to draw widespread support for ideas and leaders to appear on the ballot outside of the conventional means. Rather than wait for the long legislative process, individuals can organize their communities and pursue the will of the people through ballot petitions. The petition process is a fundamental feature of the democratic process in Maryland. However, currently, the State Board of Elections only allows for print or wet signatures on ballot petitions, greatly affecting voters with disabilities who cannot physically sign ballot petitions.

Diversifying the ways individuals can sign ballot petitions will ensure every voice will be heard to ensure the will of the people. Not allowing electronic signatures on ballot petitions effectively silences individuals who cannot sign on to ballot petitions they agree with. For voters with disabilities who have physical disabilities that makes it difficult to sign or hold a writing instrument electronic signatures is a feasible remedy to allow their voices to be heard, like all other voters.

Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act mandates state and local governments to provide equal access to its programs, services and activities. To that end, the State Board of Elections must provide a way to ensure voters with disabilities can sign petitions when they physically cannot. Provided that the State Board of Elections allowed for electronic signatures on ballot petitions during the state of emergency, it is hard to imagine the reasoning as to why electronic signatures are no longer allowed, particularly for voters with disabilities.



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Ballot petitions are one of the few ways individual citizens can create the change they want to see in their communities without having to rely on the long legislative process. Only allowing for print or wet signatures on ballot petitions bars voters with disabilities who cannot physically sign a ballot petition from being included in their communities, effectively silencing their voice and limiting democracy. Provided that the State Board of Elections previously allowed for electronic signatures on ballot petitions and to be in compliance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, we urge a favorable report on HB 1112. For any questions, please reach out to Samuela Ansah at SamuelaA@DisabilityRightsMD.Org or 443-692-2512.