

EDUCATION, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

FEBRUARY 26, 2025

Senate Bill 647 - Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility (Voting Rights for All Act)

POSITION: SUPPORT

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is the Protection & Advocacy agency in Maryland, mandated to advance the civil rights of people with disabilities. DRM supports Senate Bill 647, which expands voting access by establishing a nonpartisan voter hotline available for incarcerated individuals and allowing people with felony convictions who are currently serving to vote.

Senate Bill 647 restores voting rights to individuals currently incarcerated for felony convictions. In Maryland, approximately 16,000 people are unable to vote due to currently serving criminal convictions.¹ This disenfranchisement disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, including people with disabilities. Nationally, about 38% of incarcerated individuals have at least one disability.² Therefore, restoring voting rights is essential to ensuring the full participation of people with disabilities in our electoral system.

Senate Bill 647 also requires the State Board of Elections to establish a toll-free voter hotline for incarcerated individuals, critical in allowing people who are eligible to vote to obtain information, materials, and assistance they need to register and vote. A dedicated hotline will provide nonpartisan assistance and create clear channels for reporting voting rights violations.

DRM supports this bill, and notes that accessibility standards for the created hotline should be considered. A staffed hotline, accessible via video relay for Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, would enhance usability for all voters who regain their right to vote under this legislation.

Without this legislation, individuals incarcerated for felony convictions—many of whom have disabilities—will continue to experience the temporary loss of a fundamental right, followed by uncertainty about their ability to vote upon release. While Maryland automatically restores voting rights after

¹ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/why-we-must-restore-voting-rights-to-over-16000-marylanders/>

² <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/disabilities-reported-prisoners-survey-prison-inmates-2016>

incarceration, lack of awareness, administrative hurdles, and reintegration challenges disproportionately impact those with disabilities. The most effective approach is to ensure that individuals never lose their voting rights during the conviction and sentencing process. Additionally, establishing an accessible hotline will provide critical support, ensuring that all eligible voters, including those impacted by incarceration, have the resources they need to fully participate in civic life..

For these reasons, DRM requests a favorable report on this Senate Bill 647. Please do not hesitate to contact me at GillianJ@DisabilityRightsMD.org or by phone at 443-692-2498.

Respectfully Submitted,

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