



HB 781: Election Law - Polling Place Procedures - Voting by Elderly Voters and Voters With Disabilities (Accessible and Expedited Voting Act of Maryland)

Testimony of the Maryland Independent Living Network

SUPPORT – Favorable

House Ways & Means Committee, February 18, 2025

The Maryland Independent Living Network is a coalition of the Maryland Statewide Independent Living Council and the seven Maryland-based Centers for Independent Living (CIL). CILs are created by federal law. CILs work to enhance the civil rights and quality of services for people with disabilities. There are seven CILs located throughout Maryland, operated by and for people with disabilities. CILs provide Information and Referral, Advocacy, Peer Support, Independent Living Skills training, and Transition Services to individuals with disabilities in their communities.

The Independent Living Network submits this written testimony in **support** of HB 781.

HB 781 requires the State Board of Elections to establish guidelines for the local boards of elections to implement a process to accommodate and expedite voting for elderly voters and voters with disabilities at each early voting center and polling place. The bill's provisions require the local boards to implement the guidelines and collect feedback on the process from elderly voters and voters with disabilities and make immediate adjustments to the process and requires the training program for election judges to include instruction on best practices for assisting elderly voters and voters with disabilities.

The Independent Living Network believes it is imperative to ensure accessible and equitable voting for all citizens. Increase participation in voting ensures all voices are heard.

Currently, accessibility can vary significantly from one polling place to another. Establishing statewide guidelines will create a consistent and predictable experience for elderly voters and voters with disabilities, regardless of their location. This standardization is crucial for promoting voter confidence and participation.

Elderly voters and voters with disabilities often face unique challenges at polling places, including long waiting times, physical barriers, and complex voting equipment. Expediting the voting process for these individuals is not about giving them preferential treatment; it's about

leveling the playing field and ensuring they can exercise their fundamental right to vote without undue hardship. This might include dedicated check-in lines, prioritized access to accessible voting booths, and assistance with ballot marking when needed.

Requiring local boards to collect feedback from elderly voters and voters with disabilities is essential. This feedback loop will provide invaluable insights into the effectiveness of the implemented guidelines and identify areas for improvement. Furthermore, mandating immediate adjustments based on this feedback ensures that the process remains responsive to the needs of the community. This approach is key to creating a truly accessible and user-friendly voting system.

The State Board of Elections will be responsible for developing the specific guidelines. The State Board should address physical accessibility, communication accessibility, voting equipment accessibility, and poll worker training.

Physical Accessibility: Guidelines should address issues such as ramps, accessible parking, appropriate signage, and adequate lighting at all polling places.

Communication Accessibility: Considerations should be given to voters with visual or auditory impairments including providing materials in alternative formats (large print, Braille, audio) and ensuring poll workers are trained to assist voters with communication needs.

Equipment Accessibility: Voting equipment should be accessible to individuals with a range of disabilities, including those with limited dexterity or visual impairments. This may involve offering assistive devices or alternative voting methods.

Poll Worker Training: Comprehensive training for poll workers is crucial. They must be equipped to understand the needs of elderly voters and voters with disabilities and provide appropriate assistance with respect and sensitivity. Training should cover topics such as disability etiquette, communication strategies, and the proper use of accessible voting equipment.

In the development of these guidelines the State Board of Elections should seek out and collaborate with disability advocacy organizations and senior citizen groups. These organizations and groups possess valuable expertise and can provide crucial input to ensure the guidelines are comprehensive and effective. Furthermore, the State Board should provide adequate resources to local boards of election to support the implementation of these guidelines and training programs.

An Example of the Current State of Accessibility

An individual with a disability that uses a powerchair reports that increased participation in voting has increased convenience for most voters but has the opposite effect for those who benefit most from accessibility. Increased voter participation at polling places creates crowds at

voting locations which creates additional difficulties for powerchair users to navigate the polling place. It is common to go to a voting station and not find any wheelchair accessible parking as the current number of wheelchair accessible parking is insufficient for the number of individuals that go to polling places during early voting and election day, often leaving people with disabilities waiting for 20 minutes or longer before they're able to enter the polling location. Once inside a polling location, weaving in and out of crowds to get to the check in desk is stressful. More stress is added when having to participate in the voting process in this way, it becomes more of an inconvenience than a privilege. Availability and access to dedicated persons or teams who are knowledgeable about accommodations for people with disabilities and older citizens would create ease during the voting process. The use of dedicated lines or areas would conveniently streamline this process in a positive way. It would also likely entice even more people with disabilities and older citizens to vote at voting polls.

We appreciate the consideration of these comments.

The Maryland Independent Living Network strongly **supports** HB 781 and requests a favorable report.

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