

HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

JANUARY 21, 2025

House Bill 274 - Election Law – Local Boards of Elections – Election Plan Requirements

POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENT

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM, formerly Maryland Disability Law Center) is the Protection & Advocacy agency of Maryland, federally mandated to advance the civil rights of people with disabilities. DRM works to increase opportunities for Marylanders with disabilities to be part of their communities through voting by advocating for equal and equitable access to the ballot.

DRM supports HB 274 with one suggested friendly amendment. HB 274 seeks to require local boards of elections to submit election plans at least seven months prior to a general election to the State Board of Elections. It also requires a continued review and alteration of the election plan in partnership with the State Board of Elections. The guidelines established by HB 274 set the standard for local boards of election to approach election planning by prioritizing all Marylanders and requires local boards to consistently report back to the State Board regarding both the practical implementation of the election plan and any barriers that may impede progress. These requirements will help safeguard against potential disenfranchisement while keeping the public informed of these continued efforts.

Among other outlined measures that specifically seek to bolster the voting rights of marginalized Marylanders, the bill requires an analysis of available buildings in voting precincts that includes a determination of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) if a local board of election's plan intends to reduce the number of polling locations offered to residents.

DRM proposes a friendly amendment to explicitly name people with disabilities when talking about marginalized groups more consistently within the bill's language. Issues related to physical accessibility are not the only way people with disabilities are marginalized during the voting process.

We request a small amendment to explicitly include people with disabilities in page 3, line 16, which currently states: "ACCESSIBILITY OF THE EARLY VOTING CENTER TO HISTORICALLY DISENFRANCHISED COMMUNITIES [...]". Including people with disabilities in this portion should echo the language used in page 4, regarding drop box planning, starting at line 15: "...the accessibility of the ballot drop box to historically disenfranchised communities, including voters with disabilities[.]" Using consistent language naming people with disabilities as a protected group would provide further clarification and explicit protection for the disability community through a simple change.

HB 274 is a strong bill that requires local government to meet the voting needs of Marylanders with oversight from the State Board of Elections, strengthening the overall protection of residents' voting rights. With the proposed change, we believe this bill could be even stronger for the voting rights of people with disabilities.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on HB 274 with this amendment. Please do not hesitate to contact me at gillianj@disabilityrightsmd.org or by phone at 443-692-2498.

Respectfully Submitted,

Gillian Justice
Community Engagement
Coordinator
Disability Rights Maryland