

HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

February 18, 2025

HB 816 – Election Law – Petitions and Ballot Questions – Contents, Plain Language Requirement, and Procedures Position: SUPPORT

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is the Protection & Advocacy agency in Maryland, 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 box.

DRM supports House Bill 816, which would require ballot questions and initiatives to feature a plain language explanation of the proposed question and a practical explanation of the impact of each voting choice. Research indicates that voters often have a limited attention span when engaging with ballot language, which can impact their ability to fully comprehend its content.¹ Easier to understand language is more likely to be supported, while language that is challenging to comprehend is more likely to be opposed or abstained from selecting. Through providing a plain language description of the question being put forth, voters will feel more empowered and confident in their decisions throughout the selection process.

An analysis conducted by Ballotpedia in 2023 found that ballot measures required a graduate school reading level to understand.² This not only presents a challenge for the average voter but is especially concerning for individuals with intellectual disabilities or those experiencing cognitive impairment due to chronic illness. House Bill 816 intends to bring Maryland in line with the Federal Plain Writing Act of 2010, which would require ballot language to be easily understood by a person with an 8th grade reading level. This bill recognizes the barriers that arise due to the confusing and legalistic nature of ballot questions or initiatives and will provide voters with a plain language explanation to ensure they can make informed selections.

¹<https://www.thecampaignworkshop.com/blog/ballot-initiatives-and-ballot-measures/ballot-language>

² <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/06/plain-language-ballot-measures-disability/>

By providing voters with a deeper understanding of the decisions they are tasked to make, this bill will strengthen the democratic process across the state.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on HB 816. We are able, should the State Board of Elections need technical assistance, guidance or resources in providing support with the establishment of the proposed guidelines. Please do not hesitate to contact me at bradens@disabilityrightsmd.org or by phone at 410-929-6859.

Respectfully submitted,

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