



PEOPLE ON THE GO MARYLAND

TESTIMONY

Senate Bill 73 (SB 73)

Election Law – Polling Place Procedures – Voting by Elderly Voters and Voters With Disabilities
(Accessible and Expedited Voting Act of Maryland)

Sponsor: Senator Ellis

Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment

FAVORABLE

January 23, 2026

People On the Go Maryland (POG) is a statewide self advocacy/systems advocacy organization run for and by people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Our mission is to empower people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities to be full participants in their communities, exercise their civil rights, and make their own choices about their lives. We represent hundreds of self-advocates across Maryland who are committed to breaking down barriers and ensuring that people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities have equal opportunities in all aspects of civic life, including the fundamental right to vote.

People On the Go Maryland submits this testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 73, legislation that will ensure accessible and expedited voting procedures for elderly voters and voters with disabilities, including people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. This bill represents a crucial step toward fulfilling the promise of equal access to the ballot box for all Marylanders.

Voting Rights as a Foundation of Self-Determination and Community Inclusion

The right to vote is one of the most fundamental expressions of citizenship and self-determination. For people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, casting a ballot is not just a civic duty—it is a powerful statement of independence and a vital component of full community inclusion. When barriers prevent people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities from voting, we are denied not only a constitutional right but also the opportunity to have a voice in decisions that directly affect our lives, from healthcare and transportation policy to education and employment law.

Federal laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), and the Voting Rights Act (VRA), establish a clear legal mandate: the entire voting process must be accessible to people with disabilities. These laws recognize that equal opportunity to vote is not optional—it is a civil right. Senate Bill 73 will help Maryland meet this legal imperative by creating concrete, enforceable procedures that ensure voters with disabilities, including people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, can exercise their right to vote with dignity, privacy, and independence.

Persistent Barriers Faced by Voters with Disabilities

Despite strong legal protections, voters with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers at polling places across the nation. According to research conducted by Rutgers University for the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, in the 2022 midterm elections, 14% of voters with disabilities reported experiencing difficulties when voting—more than three times the rate of voters without disabilities (4%). A 2016 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that 83% of polling places surveyed had at least one potential impediment for voters with disabilities.

For people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, these barriers can be particularly daunting. Long wait times at polling places create significant challenges for individuals who may have difficulty standing for extended periods, who may experience heightened anxiety in crowded and chaotic environments, or who may have sensory sensitivities that make waiting in line physically and emotionally overwhelming. Polling places that are poorly organized, lack clear signage, or have inadequately trained election judges can create confusion and stress, making the voting experience intimidating rather than empowering.

These barriers are not merely inconveniences—they directly suppress voter turnout. While the disability voter turnout gap has narrowed in recent years, it persists. In 2020, 61.8% of people with disabilities voted, compared to 67.5% of people without disabilities, a gap of 5.7 percentage points. If people with disabilities had voted at the same rate as demographically similar non-disabled citizens, an additional 1.75 million votes would have been cast. Crucially, the gap in voter registration is much smaller than the gap in turnout, demonstrating that the primary issue is not a lack of interest but rather the difficulties encountered during the act of voting itself.

How Senate Bill 73 Will Address These Barriers

Senate Bill 73 takes a comprehensive, proactive approach to ensuring that the voting process is accessible and efficient for elderly voters and voters with disabilities. The bill mandates that the State Board of Elections establish clear guidelines for local election boards to implement accommodation and expedited voting procedures at all early voting centers and polling places throughout Maryland. These are not suggestions—they are enforceable requirements.

Key Provisions Include:

- **Dedicated Expedited Lines:** The bill requires dedicated expedited lines for elderly voters and voters with disabilities. This directly addresses one of the most significant barriers—long wait times—and ensures that people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, who may struggle with extended waits, can vote without undue physical or emotional strain.
- **Clearly Marked Signage:** Clear, visible signage indicating the availability of expedited services helps voters with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities navigate the polling place more independently and with less confusion, reducing anxiety and supporting self-determination.
- **Priority Seating:** Priority seating in waiting areas provides a comfortable and less overwhelming environment for individuals who may need to rest or who may be sensitive to crowded, chaotic spaces.
- **Comprehensive Training for Election Judges:** The bill mandates that election judge training programs include instruction on best practices for assisting elderly voters and voters with disabilities, including people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Training will cover the rights of voters with disabilities under State and federal law and all accessibility features of the voting system. Well-trained election judges are the front line of accessible elections—they ensure that accommodations are provided respectfully, efficiently, and correctly.
- **Real-Time Feedback and Immediate Adjustments:** Local election boards must collect feedback from elderly voters and voters with disabilities during voting operations and make immediate adjustments as necessary. This ensures that problems are identified and solved in real time, not after the election is over.
- **Accountability Through Annual Reporting:** The State Board of Elections must submit an annual report to the General Assembly that includes an analysis of the effectiveness of accommodations, a summary of feedback received, and recommendations for improvement. This creates a system of continuous improvement and ensures that the voices of voters with disabilities are heard at the highest levels of government.

The Benefits for People with Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities

This legislation will have a profound and positive impact on the ability of people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities to exercise their right to vote. By removing barriers and creating a more welcoming, efficient, and supportive voting environment, Senate Bill 73 will:

- **Increase Voter Participation:** When barriers are removed, turnout increases. Accessible voting processes have been shown to close the disability voter turnout gap. More people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities will be able to vote, ensuring that our voices are represented in the democratic process.
- **Enhance Self-Determination:** Voting is a key expression of personal autonomy and self-advocacy. An accessible voting process affirms the dignity and civil rights of people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities and reinforces the principle that we have the right and the ability to make decisions about our own lives and our communities.
- **Foster Community Inclusion:** When people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities can participate fully in elections, it strengthens our connection to the community and demonstrates that we are valued and equal members of society. Accessible voting is a visible commitment to inclusion.
- **Strengthen Maryland Democracy:** A democracy is strongest when it represents all its citizens. By ensuring that people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities can vote with ease, Maryland will uphold the principles of equality and justice that are the foundation of our nation.

Conclusion

Senate Bill 73 represents a critical opportunity for Maryland to become a national leader in accessible voting. This legislation directly addresses the barriers that have prevented people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities from fully exercising our fundamental right to vote. It establishes clear, enforceable standards; requires comprehensive training for election officials; and creates mechanisms for real-time feedback and continuous improvement.

The evidence is clear: when voting is made accessible, participation increases, and democracy is strengthened. People On the Go Maryland urges this Committee to recognize that accessible voting is not a courtesy—it is a civil right. This bill will ensure that people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities can vote with the same dignity, privacy, and independence afforded to all citizens.

For these reasons, People On the Go Maryland respectfully requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 73.

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