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HOUSE WAYS & MEANS

HB 493 : Election Law–Voting Locations – Accessibility by Public Transportation and Voters with Disabilities

February 2, 2021 1:00 p.m.

Position: Support

As the designated protection and advocacy organization for Maryland and by authority of the Help America Vote Act, Disability Rights Maryland (DRM), formerly Maryland Disability Law Center, is charged with assisting persons with disabilities to participate fully in the electoral process. Pursuant to this mandate, DRM seeks to ensure election access to a wide range of individuals with disabilities, including, but not limited to, individuals with physical, cognitive, and sensory disabilities.

DRM supports HB 493 which would require 1) counties that have fixed-route public transportation services prioritize designating ballot drop box and polling place locations an accessible distance from public transportation stops and 2) requiring ballot drop boxes be placed in a physically accessible location. According to a 2013 study,¹ funded by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, voters with disabilities reported difficulties with transportation as a reason they did not vote three times more frequently than voters without disabilities. Prioritizing public transportation access to ballot drop boxes and polling places would increase voter enfranchisement in currently underrepresented populations that utilize public transportation. Not only would this bill increase access through transportation, but it would also ensure that the voter is able to cast their ballot once they reach the location.

After receiving reports of inaccessible ballot drop boxes during the 2020 Maryland General Election; DRM surveyed 20 ballot drop box locations in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. The most common ADA accessibility issue was the physical placement of the ballot drop boxes. Several drop boxes were flush with the curb of the school or community center where they were placed. This posed a major safety issue for individuals using wheelchairs or other walking assistance devices. In order for them to place their ballot into the drop box, they would have to be in the street with vehicles. Uniform guidance on ballot drop box placement is necessary to ensure voters with disabilities have access in a safe and accessible manner. Voters should not have to compete with vehicles or navigate inaccessible sidewalks to cast their ballots.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

For more information contact:

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¹ Schur, Lisa, Adya, Meera, and Kruse, Douglas. "Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties in the 2012 Elections" Research Alliance for Accessible Voting. (2013): Pg. 28.

Signatories:



Rich Norling

Political Chair, Sierra Club Maryland Chapter

