

**KATIE FRY HESTER**  
*Legislative District 9*  
Carroll and Howard Counties

Education, Health, and  
Environmental Affairs Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on  
Cybersecurity, Information Technology  
and Biotechnology



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**THE SENATE OF MARYLAND**  
**ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401**

**Testimony in Support of SB145 - References to Absentee Voting in Communications  
- Mail-in-Voting**

January 28th, 2020

Dear Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee:

I am pleased to present Senate Bill 145. This bill would substitute “absentee ballots” and “absentee votings” with “mail-in ballots” and “mail-in-voting” respectively in all public communications with the general public.

At present, Maryland is one of many states that allows voters to vote absentee with no stated reason or excuse. As you are aware, any registered voter in the state is able to request a ballot be mailed to them, and subsequently mail-in their vote. Because there is no standard definition or requirement for what constitutes “absentee voting” across all 50 states, some voters may be unaware of their rights to request and vote through this process. Calling this process “absentee voting” is a misnomer and unnecessarily opaque.

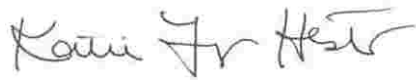
This bill will bring clarity to the absentee voting process for all registered voters, but especially those who are new to the elections process; have recently moved from another state; or move frequently, such as military personnel. Raising awareness and clarity surrounding the absentee voting process will also encourage individuals whose work schedules or personal lives impede their participation in elections to take advantage of the services that are available to them and make their voices heard.

I had the pleasure of presenting a very similar bill in this committee last year. Working with the State Board of Elections, we have made multiple changes to address their concerns. Last year’s legislation would have altered public communications to refer to “absentee voting” as “vote-by-mail.” The State Board expressed concern that “vote-by-mail” is defined in Maryland code, and may cause confusion among certain voters. For this reason, Del. Palakovich-Carr and I have altered the bill to substitute “absentee voting” with “mail-in-voting” - a phraseology that does not have a reference anywhere in Maryland code, statute, or the Constitution.

Additionally, SB145 requires a disclaimer on public communications materials, clarifying that “mail-in-voting” is referred to as “absentee voting” in Maryland statute and COMAR. By request of the Board of Elections, we have included an amendment to add the Maryland Constitution to that list of documents. These remedies achieve the goal of greater clarity in the process while adequately avoiding confusion surrounding the practice of absentee voting for engaged voters who may want to search for references to the practice in Maryland law.

This bill is a simple step that we can take as a State to improve engagement with our Democratic process and make it easier for all voters to exercise their right to vote. For that reason, **I respectfully request a favorable report for SB145.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie Fry Hester". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Senator Katie Fry Hester  
Howard and Carroll Counties