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February 20, 2020

Testimony on SB 408

Department of Legislative Services – Voting by Mail – Study Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Member organizations of the Democracy Initiative write to express our strong support for SB 476, which would require the Department of Legislative Services in consultation with the State Board of Elections and Maryland Association of Election Officials to study and make a recommendation on voting by mail.

We are 72 partners from the labor, environment, civil rights and good governance movements representing 45 million members—thousands of whom live in and advocate for issues that impact everyday people in Maryland. Our shared vision for a 21st-century democracy is clear: reduce the power of big money in politics, expand voting rights, and ensure fair representation.

The Democracy Initiative has mobilized and organized members across the country to stand up for a democracy that works for all people, not just corporate or big money interests. Leveling the playing field for civic participation is essential for our members to be able to advocate for the kitchen table issues that matter most—from clean water to criminal justice reforms to a living wage.

Millions of people want a democracy where they can freely participate, cast a vote securely, and know that vote will be counted. Currently, Maryland voters have the option of voting at an early voting center prior to Election Day or by absentee voting. However, there are additional steps the state can take to increase participation and make voting more convenient.

Vote by Mail, sometimes referred to as “vote at home,” builds on the absentee voting process, allowing voters to send in their ballot and in many cases drop it off at a convenient location. Vote by Mail differs from no-excuse absentee in that every registered voter is automatically mailed a paper ballot in the weeks before an election. The marked ballot can be returned in multiple, convenient ways on or before election day by pre-paid postage return, designated drop site or a vote center.

Voting by Mail is an important tool that can dramatically boost turnout by empowering all voters, including senior citizens and people with disabilities who may have a hard time getting to the polls, single parents, students and working people whose schedules make it difficult to stand in line for long, and rural voters who live far from their polling place. Policies that reduce friction in the voting process tend as a rule to increase voter engagement and turnout. According to Vote at Home Institute, states with full vote by mail systems averaged 10% points higher turnout than polling-place centric states in 2018 and there is strong positive engagement among lower propensity voters, who are often younger or people of color.

A growing number of states and jurisdictions conduct their elections either partially or entirely through by-mail ballots. Colorado, Oregon, and Washington operate all Vote-by-Mail elections. According to the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) report, these states were number 2, 4, and 7 respectively in voter turnout in the 2018 election. Additionally, the EAC reports that Vote by Mail was used by 27% of all 118 million votes cast in the 2018 midterm election. There is an increasing trend toward mailed-out ballot use. According to Vote at Home Institute, since 2000, more than a quarter of a billion votes have been cast via ballots delivered directly to the voter.

In Maryland, one municipality has shifted to vote-by-mail for their elections. In 2019, Rockville became the first place in Maryland and on the East Coast to adopt an almost entirely Vote by Mail system. Ballots were mailed to more than 38,000 registered voters, who could mail them back or drop them off at city hall. The Vote by Mail system nearly doubled voter turnout in Rockville elections in 2019 compared to the 2015 election.

Vote by Mail systems drive turnout because they are convenient for voters, eliminate some of the burdens that have historically disenfranchised some voters, and provide ample time for voters to do more research before casting a ballot. Additionally, Vote by Mail is an efficient system from an administrative standpoint and reduces the number of costly polling places operated by election workers. SB 408 aims to identify a Vote by Mail method that would benefit all Marylanders.

The Democracy Initiative strongly urges you to support SB 408.