

Testimony before the Senate State Government, Wagering, Tourism & Historic Preservation
Bill S3203
February 11, 2021 at 10:00am

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Thank you, Chairman Beach, and members of the committee for the opportunity to comment on S3203, which requires an in-person early voting period for specific elections. I speak today on behalf of individuals with disabilities and am appreciative that the Committee included their voices in this conversation about increasing the access to voting.

Disability Rights NJ is the federally funded, designated protection and advocacy system for people with disabilities in the State of New Jersey. Under our federal enabling statutes, we provide legal representation, advocacy, education and training, and information and referral to people with disabilities, their families, and the professionals who serve them. Under our Protection and Advocacy for Voter Access program, Disability Rights NJ works to ensure that individuals with disabilities have greater access to voting through its Disability Voter Hotline, its education and training services, and its advocacy with other stakeholders.

According to a report by the Program for Disability Research at Rutgers University, the number of eligible voters with disabilities is growing with the aging of the population and advances in

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medical technology.¹ In New Jersey, approximately 836,000 eligible voters (or 13.5% of all voters) have a disability.² However, according to the report, in 2018, nationwide, the voter turnout for individuals with disabilities in New Jersey was approximately 13.4% lower than among individuals without disabilities.³ There are many reasons for this turnout gap including illness or disability, transportation problems and difficulty accessing the polling place or the voting machine.⁴ Changes to the voting process that addresses these issues are likely to decrease the turnout gap for individuals with disabilities.

Early in-person voting provides more opportunities for individuals with disabilities to vote on an accessible machine. Although vote-by-mail has become much easier to access and provides individuals with a broader period in which to cast their vote, many individuals with disabilities are unable to vote secretly and independently through vote-by-mail. The vote-by-mail ballot is a paper ballot so individuals with visual impairments and dexterity impairments are unable to either read the ballot or fill it out without the assistance of another individual. Although Governor Murphy's 2020 executive order permitted the use of an electronic vote-by-mail ballot, individuals with disabilities still had to print the ballot out, sign it and return it in the envelope, which had the potential to prevent the individual from having full accessibility. As a

¹ Schur, Lisa and Douglas Kruse. "Projecting the Number of Eligible Voters with Disabilities in the November 2020 Elections." Rutgers University, September 24, 2020. P. 1.

² *Id.* at 13.

³ Schur, Lisa and Douglas Kruse. "Fact Sheet: Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2018 Elections." Rutgers University, 2019. P. 7.

⁴ *Id.* at pp. 3, 10.

result, many individuals still prefer to vote in person on an accessible machine which ensures they can vote secretly and independently.

In order to get to an accessible machine, individuals with disabilities must have access to transportation on Election Day and must be healthy enough to vote on that day.

Transportation to the polling place is especially difficult for individuals with disabilities because many county paratransit systems do not operate on Election Day because it is a State Holiday.

For individuals using wheelchairs, many taxi services and Uber and Lyft do not have accessible vehicles available. Disability Rights NJ's Voter Hotline receives many calls requesting transportation to the polling locations. Early voting will provide these individuals with multiple days in which to arrange transportation so that they will be able to vote in person on an accessible machine. Furthermore, because many individuals with disabilities have medical issues, an early voting period will provide individuals with disabilities more opportunities to vote without their medical issue interfering.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify here today, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.