

RHODE ISLAND COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

180 WESTMINSTER STREET

PROVIDENCE, RI 02903

TESTIMONY

BILL NO.: 2025 H 5711
BILL TITLE: Act Relating to Elections – Mail Ballots
PRIMARY SPONSORS: Representative J. Brien
COMMITTEE: House State Government & Elections

The Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights (“Commission”) **opposes** this bill.

The Commission is the state’s primary antidiscrimination law enforcement agency charged with investigating allegations of discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, credit and delivery of services. Among the allegations investigated by the Commission are those of race, ancestral origin, age and disability discrimination in employment and housing. **The Commission believes that passage of this bill would discourage voting by ethnic minorities, the elderly, people with disabilities and those who are poor.**

This bill would require that applications for mail ballots include “proof of the voter’s date of birth” and a Rhode Island driver’s license number or state identification number. Currently the online application for a mail ballot requires a Rhode Island driver’s license number or Rhode Island identification card number. The paper application does not require a license or identification card number but does require that applicants sign under oath that they are eligible registered voters. H 5711 does not define the required “proof of the voter’s date of birth” which is required in addition to a license number or state identification number. The implication is that the license or identification card is insufficient to prove date of birth. In summary, H 5711 places additional conditions on obtaining a mail ballot.

Poor individuals and working poor people with multiple jobs (many of whom are ethnic minorities), as well as people who are elderly and/or who have disabilities, may give up their right to vote when faced with the practical difficulties of obtaining the correct identification. “[I]ndividuals who lack government-issued identification are more likely to be younger, less educated, and impoverished, and—most notably—nonwhite”. Vij, S., Why Minority Voters Have a Lower Voter Turnout: An Analysis of Current Restrictions *American Bar Association*:

Human Rights Magazine, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2020). The voices of all Rhode Island citizens need to be heard. Barriers to voting, particularly when faced by the state's most vulnerable populations, are intolerable.

The Commission urges that the Committee not pass this bill.

Commission contact: Commissioner Cynthia Hiatt, 222-7563