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January 15, 2026

The Honorable Evan P. Shanley
Chairman, House Committee on State Government and Elections
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

Testimony in Support of House Bill 7007

Dear Chairman Shanley and Honorable Members of the House Committee on State Government and Elections,

My name is Christopher Bove, I am a resident of Warwick, and I write to you today to express my strong support for H. 7007 "An Act Relating to Elections – Mail Ballots". This legislation put forth by Representative O'Brien on behalf of Secretary of State Gregg Amore, would permit military voters and voters with disabilities to continue to mark and return absentee ballots electronically as authorized by the General Assembly in 2022.

In my view, the right to vote is not merely the single most important right of every American citizen, it is also our single largest obligation to our democracy and way of life. It is a right that our forefathers fought and died for, and for which many millions of people continue to fight for around the world today. The right to vote is sacred, and it is not just about marking someone's name on a piece of paper, it is about the freedom of choice, and the ability to have a say in the future of our country and communities without the influence of intimidation, coercion, or retaliation. In other words, the ability to vote privately and independently is fundamental to an individual's right to vote. Without the former, the latter can have no meaning.

I was born with a condition called Optic Nerve Hypoplasia and have been legally blind for my entire life. I am now 24 years old and have not once missed an election since I registered to vote at the age of 18, not even special elections for state and local bonds. I take pride in my participation in our democracy, but as someone who lacks the ability to drive, getting to the polls is a major challenge for me. That is why I feel so lucky to live in a state like Rhode Island where our leaders have made it so easy to vote by mail, because I honestly do not know what I would do otherwise.

Fortunately for me, I have enough usable vision to mark and return a standard mail ballot using my iPhone camera for magnification, but as someone who has been a long time advocate with disability rights organizations such as the National Federation of the Blind, I know that it can be downright impossible for those who are totally blind to privately and independently vote using a standard mail-in ballot.

The non-visual accessibility (or lack thereof) of mail ballots has become a much greater issue of focus since absentee voting began to rise in prevalence in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I am eternally grateful to former Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea, former Elections Director and current Deputy Secretary of State Rob Rock Jr, and now Secretary Amore for championing this issue and helping to bring accessible digital absentee voting to Rhode Island for voters with disabilities. Since the General Assembly passed enabling legislation in 2022, Rhode Island has been one of 12 states offering this option to voters with disabilities, and by all measure, it has been a resounding success. For the first time in our nearly 250 year history, blind Rhode Islanders can mark and return their absentee ballots privately and independently using a screen-reader, with over 70 individuals choosing to vote digitally in the 2024 General Election.

This meaningful changed has greatly benefited the disabled community in Rhode Island, especially those who are blind and visually impaired. I respectfully urge this committee to keep our state's elections open and accessible to all on this, our 250th year as a nation. Let's make this critical progress permanent and ensure the vibrant participation of voters with disabilities in our democracy for generations to come.

Sincerely,



Christopher Bove