



# Rhode Island Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

• COMMUNICATIONS • OPPORTUNITIES • EQUALITY •

Dear Chair Rep. Shanley and Members of the Committee,

My name is Michelle Cline, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Rhode Island Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (CDHH). CDHH is the state agency charged with advising the Governor and the General Assembly on matters impacting Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Rhode Islanders. Please accept this letter as CDHH's written testimony in support of **H7007**, relating to elections and mail ballots.

CDHH strongly supports H7007, which would allow eligible disabled voters and voters covered under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) to continue utilizing electronically transmitted ballots beyond December 31, 2025.

For many Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing voters, electronic ballot access is not a convenience—it is a critical accessibility tool that supports independent and private participation in the voting process. Traditional paper-based mail ballot systems can present barriers, including inaccessible instructions, challenges with signatures or witnessing requirements, and reliance on third parties to complete ballots. These barriers can undermine voter autonomy, privacy, and equal access.

The electronic ballot system currently authorized under Rhode Island law has enabled eligible disabled voters to participate more fully and independently in elections, consistent with the accessibility requirements of Section 508 of the federal Rehabilitation Act. Allowing this authorization to expire would represent a step backward, removing an accommodation that has already been implemented and relied upon by disabled voters across the state.

H7007 appropriately balances accessibility with election security. The bill requires that electronic transmission systems undergo independent security reviews, meet National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Cybersecurity Framework guidelines or successor federal standards, and receive approval from the Secretary of State. These safeguards ensure that accessibility and election integrity advance together.

From CDHH's perspective, this legislation is about continuity, equity, and civil rights. Voting is a fundamental right, and access to that right should not be subject to expiration when effective and secure accommodations are already in place.

For these reasons, the Rhode Island Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing respectfully urges the Committee to support passage of H7007.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony for the record.

Respectfully submitted,

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Michelle Cline  
Executive Director  
Rhode Island Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing



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