



**Testimony in Support of A4746
Assembly State and Local Government Committee
February 15, 2023**

Good afternoon, Chairman Verelli and Vice Chair Swain. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey (LWVNJ). My name is Philip Hensley and I am the Democracy Policy Analyst with LWVNJ. We are here to testify in support of Assembly Bill 4746.

The League of Women Voters has long supported policies to increase access to the ballot. This bill would do just that: allow voters with disabilities to vote using an accessible ballot and return it in a secure and convenient way.

There is a real need for this legislation. Despite the strides made in recent years to increase the accessibility of in-person polling places, a survey conducted for the Election Assistance Commission by researchers at Rutgers University found that 30 percent of people with disabilities reported difficulty in voting, compared with 8 percent of people without disabilities.¹ Turnout among voters with disabilities is also consistently lower than overall voter turnout.

Providing an accessible mail-in ballot for voters with visual or physical impairments would not only make voting more accessible for voters who cannot themselves read or manipulate a traditional paper mail-in ballot, it would also promote the integrity of the election process. Accessible ballots allow voters to complete their ballots themselves, and confirm that their choices are recorded, instead of depending on the assistance of another person. As a result, this bill would preserve voter privacy and give voters the confidence their ballots are completed as they desired them to be.

This bill also provides for the electronic return of accessible vote-by mail ballots. Currently, 13 states allow voters with disabilities to return mail ballots by electronic means. And electronic return of absentee ballots is already the law in New Jersey, as overseas and military voters are eligible to return their voted absentee ballots by email or fax. By allowing disabled voters to also return their ballots electronically, we can ensure that voting is truly accessible to all. Providing for accessible ballots, without providing for electronic return of those ballots, would mean that disabled voters would have to print, fold, seal and mail their completed ballot, adding significant hurdles to the voting process for these voters. New Jersey allows overseas and military voters to return their ballots electronically because that reasonable accommodation ensures those voters will have their ballots counted. This bill extends similar accommodations for a limited

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https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/document_library/files/Fact_sheet_on_disability_and_voter_turnout_in_2020_0.pdf

number of disabled voters, those whose physical or visual impairments would make it otherwise impossible for them to complete their own mail-in ballot.

As part of our work assisting voters, the League has helped a number of New Jersey voters directly impacted by the lack of an accessible ballot return option. During the 2022 General Election, the League's Election Protection Hotline received calls from two voters with disabilities who were unable to return their ballots. We were able to connect these voters with local League volunteers who were able to serve as ballot bearers. Without our hotline these voters may not have been able to cast their ballots at all. These voters deserve the option of an accessible ballot with a convenient electronic return option.

The League acknowledges that there are concerns related to the electronic transmission of any ballot. But the reality of election administration is that a balance must be struck between accessibility and security, and that tensions exist between both goals. We believe this bill strikes the right balance by modestly expanding electronic ballot return to a small and carefully defined set of voters who would significantly benefit from this accommodation.

It is important to note that this bill would only result in a very small increase in the number of ballots being electronically returned. In the 2020 election, 11,732 overseas and military ballots were returned in New Jersey. This represents 0.25 percent of the over 4.6 million ballots cast. This bill would likely result in only a very slight increase in the number of electronically returned ballots, an increase representing a tiny fraction, a thousandth of one percent of the overall vote.

This bill would allow voters with disabilities to exercise their fundamental right to vote, protecting their autonomy and privacy. We strongly support this legislation and urge you to vote yes on Assembly Bill 4746. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Testimony presented by:

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