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Marriage Equality Rhode Island comments to the Secretary of State on proposed rules for establishing the procedures for the issuance of Rhode Island voter identification cards

This testimony is being presented by Marriage Equality Rhode Island (MERI) - a grassroots, civil rights organization that works to advocate for and advance the liberties and interests of Rhode Island's LGBTQ community.

MERI greatly appreciates the opportunity to be included in this discussion. While many of our concerns will be addressed to the Rhode Island Board of Elections at such time it begins the discussion of rules and regulations relative to poll worker training and polling station operations relative to the new voter ID law, we have some specific comments regarding the identification itself which are appropriate for today's meeting.

The new voter ID law has the potential to disenfranchise a significant portion of Rhode Island's transgender community. It is well documented that photo identifications can cause everything from bureaucratic headaches to legitimate safety concerns for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals.

Many transgender people do not possess government-issued photo identifications. Additionally, records such as birth certificates, social security cards or identifications from an educational institutions may include inaccurate gender markers or photographs of the individual. Finally, it is worth noting that a sizable number of transgender Rhode Islanders find themselves in transient circumstances because they may not be accepted by their family and immediate acquaintances. Thus, it could be difficult for them to produce a utility, credit card or cell phone bill.

It is our understanding through reviewing the most recent proposed rules, that no gender marker will be included in the voter identification. MERI strongly supports the Secretary's decision not to include gender markers, for the previously referenced complications markers can cause transgender and gender non-conforming voters.

Finally, we are concerned that there does not appear to be any proposed rule or regulation regarding how an individual would go about changing his or her name on a voter identification card. On Election Day, it is possible for a transgender woman's voter ID to list a male name and photograph or for a transgender man to list the name and photograph of a woman. This could cause poll workers to question the individual's identity and draw unnecessary or certainly unwanted attention to the voter's identity as a transgender individual.

Again, we appreciate the opportunity to present these concerns today. We look forward to discussing the concerns that have been raised here this morning with the Secretary's staff and other stakeholders in order to promulgate rules and regulations that are as fair and inclusive as possible. Thank you.