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Testimony of
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On Senate Bill 644 (crossfiled as House Bill 766)
Joint Committee on Transparency and Open Government Act
Before the Committee on Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
Maryland Senate
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I am the president of iSolon.org, a non-profit public policy institute focused on issues of democratic reform involving the use of information technology. In 2008, I was a fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, where I conducted a survey of legislative transparency for the 99 state legislative bodies in the U.S. I have also spoken on legislative transparency to NALIT, the section of the National Conference of State Legislatures composed of state legislative IT staff.

I applaud you for considering legislation to create a Joint Committee on Transparency and Open Government. But we also know the track record of such study committees, including the promise during the Maryland General Assembly's 2010 legislative session to convene an open government study committee last summer.

To send a strong signal that you are serious about legislative transparency, I would encourage you to amend SB 644 to require the Joint Committee to operate in a transparent way using simple, cost-effective, and widely deployed legislative information technologies. My three recommendations to dispel fears that the Joint Committee will function to merely postpone serious debate and legislation to open up Maryland government are:

First, not only webcast the Joint Committee's public meetings but archive the webcasts online and integrate the webcasts with meeting agendas. In Maryland, the Town of Takoma Park, with a population under 20,000, already uses such technology. Across the U.S., hundreds of towns, many with populations under 10,000, also use such technology. So deploying such technology is clearly not a matter of cost or technological sophistication.

Second, provide email notice of all the public meetings of the Joint Committee. Online signup for email notice is widely used today and is absolutely essential for truly accessible public meetings held at irregular times. You may use Facebook's event application or any of a dozen other free email notification apps to provide this vital type of meeting transparency.

Lastly, provide all members of the Joint Committee with electronic roll call voting technology automatically linked to a computer database. Easy access to roll call votes is essential in a well-functioning representative democracy. The technology used in electronic voting, popularly known as clickers, has become pervasive in modern society, mostly used in a classroom setting to facilitate multiple choice test taking. For example, in Anne Arundel County, where I live, every public school has at least one classroom equipped with a set of clickers. In one school, every classroom has a set of clickers.

Clearly, if Anne Arundel County can afford thousands of clickers for student test taking, the Joint Committee can afford a dozen clickers for its members.

I'd also encourage the Joint Committee to signal that it is interested in advancing the state-of-the-art in legislative transparency. But the steps toward open government I've proposed here all involve inexpensive, off-the-shelf technology. If grade schoolers today are proficient using Youtube, email, and clickers, the Maryland General Assembly's Joint Committee on Transparency and Open Government should not be intimidated by such technology.

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