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Date: March 10, 2020

Senate Bill 851: Human Services – Department of Disabilities – Accessibility Programs

Committee: Senate Finance Committee

Position: Support

Submitted by: Ken Capone

My name is Ken Capone. I am the Public Policy Director for People On the Go of Maryland (POG). POG is Maryland's statewide advocacy organization led by and for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

POG's vision is to advocate, educate and legislate on behalf of individuals with disabilities, parents, caregivers, advocates and legislators about the importance of choice and the freedom it brings with the reward of independence.

POG supports Senate Bill 851 which would transfer the Telecommunications Access of Maryland (TAM) program from the Department of Information Technology (DoIT) to the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD).

The TAM program makes it possible for people with intellectual and or developmental disabilities to have the choice and the freedom to communicate independently. The TAM program serves people with intellectual and or developmental disabilities by providing the technology to use communication devices like picture phones, mobility aids, voice aids through customized evaluations free of charge to find out what works best for each individual.

POG has a number of members around the state who are blind or require access to telecommunication relay services and need accessible Information in alternative means. Transferring the TAM program to MDOD will ensure broader access for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities that communicate using alternative means of communication.

POG is also part of a national taskforce named the Right to Communicate made up of national partners to create a **National Resource Center on Augmented and Alternative Communication**. The taskforce working with Senator Casey has put forth

federal legislation called Access to Free Speech for All Act S.1836<sup>1</sup> which has been introduced to support national training, technical assistance, and resource centers to ensure that all individuals with significant disabilities affecting communication have access to augmentative and alternative communication devices, services, and supports the individuals need to interact with others, in order to learn, work, socialize, and take advantage of all aspects of society in the United States.

For individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities not being able to communicate creates significant barriers. Not being able to communicate effectively reduces the ability to take advantage of learning opportunity, social interactions, and possible jobs. Not being able to communicate also puts individuals with significant disabilities that affect their communication at higher risk for abuse and neglect. Specific communication devices, services, and other supports are able to make communication a reality for those with complex needs. To make sure individuals get the communication devices and services they need, professionals and staff supporting people with significant disabilities affecting their communication need training and information about augmentative and alternative communication.

We support the transfer to MDOD because POG has a positive history of collaboration with MDOD and feels MDOD is best suited to oversee TAM; telecommunications devices and distribution of accessible information for disabled individuals. POG is confident that placing the TAM program in MDOD is a good fit to ensure that the TAM program continue to make a positive difference in the lives of the consumers they serve.

*“Living without being able to communicate is like being behind four glass walls. You are able to see others and they can see you; but you are ignored, or worse, talked down to until you stop remembering who you are and why you are important.”<sup>2</sup> -- Rick Creech, AAC user, US Senate testimony*

POG respectfully asks for a favorable report for Senate Bill 851

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/s1836/BILLS-116s1836is.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Rick Creech, AAC User, Testimony Senate Special Committee on Aging Hearing, 4/27/2017