



House Bill 1003 – Human Services – Department of Disabilities – Accessibility Programs

House Health and Government Operations Committee, March 4, 2020

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

Senate Finance Committee, March 10, 2020

POSITION: SUPPORT

Dear Chairs Pendergrass and Kelley:

United Seniors of Maryland, USM is pleased to submit this letter of support for House Bill 1003 and Senate Bill 851, which transfers the operations and oversight of the Telecommunications Access of Maryland (TAM) program from the Department of Information Technology (DoIT) to the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD).

Maryland seniors experience a high level of hearing and vision loss as they age. USM supports the elevation and transfer of TAM Program into MDOD.

The TAM program serves users with a wide range of accessibility needs, including Marylanders who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind, Blind/low vision, as well as Marylanders with physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. The range of constituents receiving TAM services is similar to that which is being served and supported by MDOD. *MDOD has a strong constituent services and outreach team and can help expand TAM's reach to people with speech and other disabilities. Seniors needs this level of state coordination.*

- MDOD has expertise in program development and management, and is adept in developing partnerships with state and local policymakers, county and municipal leaders, and members of the advocacy community.
- The bill requires that the TAM Executive Director is an actual user of TAM services stating “the TAM Director ... shall be an individual who is Deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind, or speech disabled,” ... and is a user of telecommunications relay services.”

- The bill gives the TAM Director direct access to the Secretary of Disabilities and charges the Director with advising the Department. The TAM Director will serve as a member of the MDOD Executive Leadership Team. Other members include the Deputy Secretary, Deputy Assistant Secretary, and Director of Communications and Outreach.
- The proposed legislation will cross-pollinate existing stakeholder groups to open channels of communication by: adding a representative from the Governor's Advisory Board for Telecommunications Relay as a standing member of the Maryland Commission on Disabilities (MDOD's advisory board); adding a representative from the Maryland Commission on Disabilities as a standing member of the Governor's Advisory Board for Telecommunications Relay; and adding a representative from the Governor's Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing as a standing member of the Governor's Advisory Board for Telecommunications Relay.
- One of MDOD's priorities is emergency preparedness policy development and training. MDOD's Director of Emergency Preparedness currently serves as the Secretary's designee on the Next Generation 911 Commission and is an advocate for accessible technology integration. The transfer of TAM to MDOD will amplify the integration of such technologies with Next Generation 911 to ensure services are equally accessible to Marylanders who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or who have speech or communication disabilities.
- United Seniors of Maryland supports maintaining the integrity of the TAM Program and its budgets under MDOD.

For these reasons, we urge your committee to give this legislation a favorable report. If you have any questions, please contact United Seniors of Maryland at 410.608.7966.

Thank you for supporting seniors with hearing and vision loss in a positive bill.

Many thanks,

Elizabeth Weglein

President

United Seniors of Maryland

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