



NATIONAL FEDERATION
OF THE BLIND
MARYLAND

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Subject: Support for SB 851

To: Members of the Senate Finance Committee

From: Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

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Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland (NFBMD) urge the Senate Finance Committee to ensure that the Deaf Blind citizens of Maryland receive effective and necessary telecommunications services by voting in favor of SB851. For years, NFBMD has advocated for the relocation of the Telecommunications Access Maryland (TAM) program from the Maryland Department of Information Technology (DOIT) to the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD) and for the establishment of a Deaf Blind Facilitator Program. MDOD is best positioned to administer TAM and its programs as a result of MDOD's proven expertise in disability policy, deeply rooted understanding and belief in the abilities of those with disabilities and different communication methods, experienced staff that have a variety of disabilities including blindness and those who are deaf and hard of hearing (DHOH), and a solid history of managing, implementing, and modernizing programs. WE have the greatest confidence in MDOD's ability to administer the TAM program so that Maryland's deaf blind population finally receives the services to which they are entitled under the law.

The Problem:

- In its current location at DOIT, deaf blind Marylanders are not able to receive effective or necessary telecommunications services and they are shunted aside by the needs of the larger population of deaf and hard of hearing individuals despite various Federal laws that define “deaf blind” as a category of disability that entitles such individuals to access to telecommunications services in a manner that is accessible given the individual’s specific limitation. This means that though they qualify for and are entitled to services, they are often not receiving the services that would enable them to communicate given their unique needs
- Though there is an urgent need for deaf-blind individuals to receive telecommunications facilitation services, and though the funding for such a program has been earmarked, there is nothing in statute that permits (AG opinion) any Maryland State entity to provide it. As a result, the money sits unused and the deaf blind population does not receive a needed service.
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- Certain members of the DHOH community have historically prevented the Deaf Blind Facilitator Program from moving forward by arguing that the Governor’s Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing would be the best place to administer TAM. However, this is impracticable and would further harm the deaf blind community. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing community do not consider the deaf blind to be part of their DHOH community and consider them to be individuals with “physical disabilities.” As a result, ODHH does not attend to the needs of the deaf blind, and moving TAM there would further disenfranchise the deaf blind. Moreover, ODHH does not have the infrastructure, operational capacity, or expertise to administer TAM (ODHH is a policy shop, not a program management office).
- DOIT is an internally-facing operations entity whose mission, resources, and expertise are to support state employees and other departments, not the public. TAM service recipients are members of the public and thus not receiving the best service possible given that TAM’s mission of serving the public is inconsistent with DOIT’s.

Why Does NFBMD Care About TAM?

- TAM administers telecommunication access services for deaf blind individuals in Maryland, and NFBMD is Maryland’s oldest and largest advocacy organization representing the blind and deaf blind.
- The Deaf and Hard of Hearing community do not consider the deaf blind to be part of their DHOH community and consider them to be individuals with “physical disabilities.” As a result, deaf blind individuals are generally not represented by DHOH advocacy organizations.
- Deaf blind individuals use a combination of communication tools including sign language, Braille, large print, finger spelling, and other methods. Thus, traditional services like Relay do not work in most instances without additional modifications such as Braille displays or other supports. NFBMD is experienced in and knowledgeable about such communication methods that augment traditional DHOH communication. TAM currently provides some deaf blind technology services including Braille TTY or

text telephone, where the sighted person in the conversation types into a keyboard and the deaf blind user communicates back using Braille. However, these methods can and should be modernized.

- TAM also coordinates, in collaboration with the Maryland State Library, NFB-NEWSLINE, which is a free audio and app-based news service for anyone who is blind, low-vision, deaf blind, or otherwise print-disabled that offers access to more than 500 publications, emergency weather alerts, job listings, and more.

Reasons for Supporting the Bill:

- The law will finally permit the Deaf Blind Facilitator Program to be established, tapping into funding that is already earmarked and providing a service that is desperately needed.
- MDOD will fairly and appropriately manage the resources in TAM consistent with the law to ensure that only the eligible programs receive funding, as defined by the bill.
- MDOD, because of its experience and expertise with the deaf blind community, deaf community, and blind community, will ensure that the specialized telecommunications needs of the deaf blind citizens of Maryland are addressed and will no longer allow them to be shunted aside.
- MDOD has a proven record of understanding disability and special needs and emphasizing the abilities of individuals. This philosophy will enhance the TAM program.
- MDOD, the entity which will manage and administer TAM, is an outward-facing entity whose aim is to serve the public, particularly the disability population in Maryland. This mission is consistent with that of TAM.
- Cross-collaboration among The MDOD's Advisory Board, which is the Maryland Commission on Disabilities (of which NFBMD President Ronza Othman is a member), the Governor's Advisory Board of Telecommunications Relay (GABTAR), and the Governor's Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing will ensure that the entities that are experts in DHOH and deaf blind matters are working together rather than independently. This will improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Conclusion:

The National Federation of the Blind of Maryland enthusiastically and fervently asks you to vote favorable on SB851, Human Services – Department of Disabilities – Accessibility Programs. We believe that this bill is critical to ensure equal access to necessary and effective telecommunications services for Marylanders who are deaf blind. We have tremendous confidence in the Maryland Department of Disabilities' ability to administer TAM and believe it can do so in a manner that enhances and modernizes TAM. Further, given the experience and expertise of MDOD and its staff, and given that they both understand disability on an innate level and live it every day as members of the communities covered by this bill, MDOD is the best and only entity that can effectively and fairly administer TAM.