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Secretary

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Carol A. Beatty
Secretary

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Deputy Secretary

Larry Hogan, Governor • Boyd K. Rutherford, Lt. Governor

DATE: March 4, 2020

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

COMMITTEE: Health and Government Operations Committee

POSITION: Support

Dear Chair Pendergrass,

The Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD) and the Maryland Department of Information Technology (DoIT) are pleased to submit this joint letter of support for House Bill 1003, which transfers the operations and oversight of the Telecommunications Access of Maryland (TAM) program from DoIT to MDOD.

WHAT TAM DOES

For over 30 years the TAM program has provided telecommunications access to Marylanders. Currently, the program oversees all Maryland Relay services, Maryland Accessible Telecommunications (MAT), and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB)-Newsline® service.

Maryland Relay Services

Maryland Relay provides the following array of telecommunication accessibility services:

- **Traditional Relay (TTY)** is for users who are Deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened, or have difficulty speaking;
- **Hearing Carry-Over** and **Speech-to-Speech** is for users who have difficulty speaking;
- **Voice Carry-Over Relay** is for users who prefer to use their own voice in phone conversations;
- **Captioned Telephone** is for hard-of-hearing users who wish to read as they listen; and
- **Braille TTY** is for DeafBlind users.

Maryland Accessible Telecommunications (MAT) Program

The MAT Program provides free evaluations and assistive telecommunications devices for qualified individuals who find it difficult to use a standard phone. The users can include people who are:

- **Deaf/Late-Deafened**, a user who has severe to profound hearing loss;
- **Hard of Hearing**, a user who is unable to hear speech on phone without amplification;
- **Low Vision/Blind**, a user who is blind/significant loss of field/acuity or legally blind;
- **DeafBlind**, a user who has severe to profound hearing loss and loss of sight;
- **Difficulty Speaking**, a user who is unable to speak intelligibly/loudly on phone;
- **Limited Mobility**, a user who has little/no ability to grip, lift, hold, or dial phone; or have
- **Cognitive Difficulty**, a user who has difficulty dialing a series of numbers.

Accessible telecommunication devices include amplified phones, hands-free phones, TTYs, DeafBlind communicators, large-button phones, picture phones, captioned telephones, tablet computers, and emergency dialers.

National Federation of the Blind (NFB)-Newsline®

Provides 24/7 access to over 300 publications (including 4 Spanish periodicals) to the Blind and to those who cannot read conventional print. Content can be accessed via a touch-tone telephone, online, or by downloading publications to an e-reader and a free mobile app through iTunes.

THE BENEFITS OF TRANSFERRING TAM

Agency Functions: Inward-facing vs. Outward-facing Agencies

- DoIT is largely an internal-facing department that provides information technology services to state agencies. The TAM program by design, however, is an outward-facing program designed to serve the public. TAM's charge aligns more closely with that of MDOD, which is an outward-facing agency charged with improving services for all Marylanders with disabilities.

Improving Constituent Services

- The TAM program serves users with a wide range of accessibility needs, including Marylanders whom are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind, Blind/low vision, and 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 through policy development and direct services.
- MDOD has a strong constituent services and outreach team. Thus, MDOD can help expand TAM's reach to people with speech and other disabilities.

Streamlining Programs

- MDOD has expertise in program development and management, and is experienced in developing partnerships with state and local policymakers, county and municipal leaders, and members of the advocacy community.
- The TAM program and MDOD have an existing working relationship as MDOD's Maryland Technology Assistance Program (MDTAP) provides evaluations, equipment distribution, and support services for the MAT program. The transfer would improve services by streamlining internal oversight.

WHAT THE BILL DOES

Focuses on the User Experience

- Ensures that the TAM Executive Director is an *actual* user of TAM services. The bill requires that “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.”
- Gives the TAM Director direct access to the Secretary of Disabilities and charges the Director with advising the Department. The TAM Director will also serve as a member of the MDOD Executive Leadership Team, which consists of the Deputy Secretary, Deputy Assistant Secretary, and Director of Communications and Outreach.

Promotes Program Integrity by Opening Lines of Communication

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 MDOD's Advisory Board the Maryland Commission on Disabilities; 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.

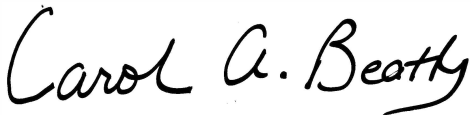
Policy Collaboration

Bringing the TAM and MDOD Policy Teams together is of mutual benefit for developing solutions to issues facing Marylanders.

- 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.

If you have any questions, please contact Elizabeth Hall, Director of Interagency Affairs, (410)767-3652, elizabeth.hall2@maryland.gov.

Sincerely,



Carol A. Beatty
Secretary of Disabilities



Michael G. Leahy
Secretary of Information Technology