



Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council

CREATING CHANGE • IMPROVING LIVES

House Appropriations Committee

**HB 98: Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing - Deafblind Co-Navigation Services Program -
Established**

January 30, 2024

Position: Support

The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council (Council) is an independent public policy organization that creates change to make it possible for people with developmental disabilities to live the lives they want with the support they need. Our vision is that people with and without disabilities in Maryland live, learn, work, and play together.

WHAT does this legislation do?

- DeafBlind (Deaf-Blind, deafblind) is the term used for people with a combination of hearing and vision loss that varies for each individual. HB 98 establishes the Deafblind Co-Navigation Services Program in the Governor's Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH). The services would be free.
- This program uses co-navigators to support people who are DeafBlind. Co-navigators relay visual and environmental information in the preferred language and communication mode to the person who is DeafBlind. A co-navigator is not an interpreter. A co-navigator does not make decisions for the person who is DeafBlind.
- Through the Co-Navigation Services Program, people who are DeafBlind will have better access to physical surroundings and will be able to make informed decisions.

WHY is this legislation important?

- **People who are DeafBlind want co-navigation services because they align with best practices.** Advocates from the DeafBlind community support co-navigation because it promotes informed decisions and self-empowerment. Co-navigators allow people who are DeafBlind to live more independently by having greater access to the environment around them.
- **A statewide program ensures equity for people who are DeafBlind across Maryland.** In 2022, there were 188 children identified as DeafBlind in Maryland schools, according to the most recent data reported by the National Center on Deaf-Blindness. This report also finds that people who are DeafBlind come from all races, ethnicities, and genders. But, access to supports, such as appropriate special education services in early childhood education, varies by geography. A statewide program promotes better communication accessibility for all people who are DeafBlind in Maryland.

It is critical that people with disabilities have full access to the supports they need and want to thrive. This bill ensures that people who are DeafBlind receive empowering supports for independent living. For these reasons, the Council supports HB 98.

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