

Wes Moore
Governor

Usherla DeBerry
Acting Director

Aruna Miller
Lt. Governor



**HB 98 DEAFBLIND CO-NAVIGATION SERVICES PROGRAM
SB 185 DEAFBLIND CO-NAVIGATION SERVICES PROGRAM**

**MARYLAND GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF THE
DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING**

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ACTING DIRECTOR USHERLA DEBERRY, Ed.S.

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

**Delegate Ben Barnes, Chair
Delegate Mark S. Chang, Vice-Chair
January 30, 2024**

SENATE EDUCATION, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

**Senator Brian J. Feldman, Chair
Senator Cheryl C. Kagan, Vice-Chair
January 30, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chair and distinguished members of the committee, my name is Usherla DeBerry. I have a long history providing Support Service Provider (SSP) services to the DeafBlind community. I am honored to be here on behalf of the Governor's Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (GODHH) as its acting director to provide testimony to support the establishment of the Co-Navigation Services Program.

The proposed bill would create a Co-Navigation Service Program within ODHH for Deaf-Blind individuals in Maryland support for visual and environmental services to assist with communication and accessibility. The office will receive requests and coordinate services with a paired/or assigned Co-Navigator. Since the Co-Navigation Program is not under ODHH's purview and in order to establish it, additional resources including identifying grants and creating a position will be required.

This afternoon, in this room, you see several DeafBlind people here in person and some who are here through Zoom. They are here seeking equity. They have been told in our community 'I do not have time to assist' or 'This is time consuming.' Additionally, there is a mother of one DeafBlind witness who will also provide a witness testimony. DeafBlind lives do impact their loved ones and should not feel a burden.

This bill empowers DeafBlind to make choices for themselves based on tactile and environmental information they receive and be able to not only participate in society but also to contribute to the society as a whole. This is a serious, dire need of access for the DeafBlind Marylanders. The DeafBlind would be able to attend a workshop, exercise regularly such as hiking, shopping, make financial transactions, to their jobs, to travel, vote, keep medical appointments and many more that we all take granted on a daily basis. The DeafBlind will be able to contribute to the local economy while being provided sighted guides who communicate accessible information to empower the DeafBlind with choices.

Recently, I worked with a DeafBlind customer transporting them to a training course related to how to use a cane. During the appointment, it was important for me to share what was happening within the environment such as facial expressions, directions, sizes, actions, layout of room, what was on the tables such as notepads/foods/drinks, people and objects. The social cues were to the 'T' explaining personal feelings, reactions and prompts on his arm and back using haptics - my customer wanted to find his DeafBlind friend and that is how this all came about to connect them. A connection then a smile was 'felt.'

GODHH has been consistent in advocating for communication access for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Marylanders and this includes the DeafBlind community. My predecessor, former director Kelby Brick, a strong advocate for our community, whose work resulted in Maryland's rank among the top states to provide American Sign Language interpreters on broadcast television during the pandemic. This is one example of the power of ending injustice embracing inclusion. It does not stop there. We shall continue the legacy of improving the lives of our DeafBlind community. After all, Governor Wes Moore has shared 'leave no one behind.'

Please support and pass this bill to increase DeafBlind's independence and to empower them to contribute to society.

Thank you.