



MARYLAND
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

January 29, 2024

Senate Bill 185
Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing – Deafblind Co–Navigation Services
Program – Established
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: Favorable

The Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals, and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

Senate Bill 185 establishes the Deafblind Co-Navigation Services Program in the Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing to provide co-navigation services to deafblind individuals in the State.

Senate Bill 185 aims to offer co-navigation services to deafblind individuals in the State, ensuring accessibility in communication and decision-making. The services provided by Senate Bill 185 include: (I) Offering visual and environmental information or sighted services to enhance communication accessibility; (II) Delivering services in the individual's preferred language and communication mode; (III) assisting the individual in accessing their physical surroundings and making informed decisions about their environment.

Deafblindness affects approximately 2.47 million Americans, with individuals over the age of 65 constituting 63% of this community.¹ The condition creates challenges in accessing both visual and auditory information, requiring external support for understanding the surrounding environment. Senate Bill 185 seeks to bridge this gap by providing autonomy and decision-making power to the deafblind community. Currently, only 1,276 deafblind individuals nationwide are receiving co-navigation services.² The proposed program would significantly expand support, advocating for programming, services, and policies to enhance the quality of life for individuals with deafblindness. The Maryland Catholic Conference strongly supports

¹ <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.helenkeller.org%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2023%2F06%2FAmerican-Community-Survey-Data-Summaries-2021-Updated-6-24.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

² https://www.nfadb.org/resources/Documents/SSP_Co-navigator%20Position%20Paper-Final.pdf

policies that improve the lives of individuals with disabilities and believes that this program will contribute to greater equity for an underserved population.

For these reasons, the Maryland Catholic Conference asks for a favorable report on **SB185**.

Thank you for your consideration.