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SENATE EDUCATION, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

**Senate Bill 185: Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing—Deafblind Co-Navigation Services Program—
Established**

Date: January 30, 2024

Position: Support

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is the protection and advocacy organization for the state of Maryland; the mission of the organization, part of a national network of similar agencies, is to advocate for the legal rights of people with disabilities throughout the state. One of the mandated purposes of DRM's legal work is to ensure that people with disabilities are included in their communities and that they have access to the supports and services that will make living and participating in community life possible. Senate Bill 185 would further this goal by establishing the Deafblind Co-Navigation Services Program within the Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing to provide co-navigators to support people who are deafblind; co-navigators relay visual and environmental information to individuals who are deafblind in the individuals' preferred language and communication mode. The program would be free to individuals with deafblindness.

A co-navigator is not a decisionmaker or aide; rather, by providing information about an individual's environment and physical surroundings, the co-navigator supports the individual with deafblindness by giving them information that empowers the individuals and enables them to make decisions and live more independently.

An individual's zip code should not dictate whether they have meaningful access to the world. By dictating the creation of a statewide co-navigation program, Senate Bill 185 will promote equity by ensuring that individuals with deafblindness throughout the state of Maryland have access to co-navigators. For these reasons, DRM supports Senate Bill 185.

For more information or if questions, contact: Leslie Seid Margolis, Managing Attorney and Policy Counsel, lesliem@disabilityrightsmd.org or 443-692-2505.