



SB 813: Health Care Facilities – Access to Telephones

Testimony of Maryland Centers for Independent Living

LETTER OF INFORMATION

Senate Finance Committee, March 7, 2024

Centers for Independent Living (CIL) are created by federal law. CILs work to enhance civil rights and community services for people with disabilities. There are seven CILs throughout Maryland, operated by and for people with disabilities. At least 51% of CIL staff and Board members are people with disabilities. CILs provide Information and Referral, Advocacy, Peer Support, Independent Living Skills training, and Transition Services to individuals in their communities.

The Independent Living Network submits this written testimony as a letter of information for SB 813.

SB 813 provides that a telephone must be made available to individuals admitted to specified health care facilities. Among other things, SB 813 provides that the telephone must be accessible for use by an individual with a hearing impairment and establishes that there is a process to request assistive communication technology.

Individuals that are not disabled may take for granted the connectivity provided by smartphones, mobile devices and modern communication networks. However, individuals with physical or developmental disabilities do not have that luxury. It has been estimated that nearly 15% of the world's population has a physical or developmental disability that restricts the use of telephones and mobile devices when accessing modern communication networks.

Connectivity is more important than ever, which is why it is critical that telephones for individuals with disabilities are easy to use and appropriate for their disability. For an individual with physical disabilities a telephone that requires fine motor skills and acute vision may be extremely difficult or nearly impossible to use. For an individual with a cognitive disability a telephone that requires memory, attention, and reading skills would increase the difficulty of operating the telephone.

The scope of the disability and the person's cognitive level are critical to the use of a telephone or assistive communication device. Depending on the type and severity of the physical disability, the actual requirements of a telephone will vary. For example, a telephone for an individual with

blindness or low vision will be equipped with braille keypads, a telephone for an individual with a hearing impairment or is deaf will be equipped with flashing visual ringers, and a telephone for an individual with cerebral palsy might feature oversized buttons. Additional features such as a simple and consistent user interface, limited setup issues, streamlined operational menus, voice activation features, ergonomically accessible hardware design, easy to read displays, adjustable sound levels and lighted “ringers” are all important to accessibility.

We appreciate the consideration of these comments.

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