



March 8, 2024

**Senate Finance Committee  
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

*SB 991 - Behavioral Health - Language Assistance Services Pilot Program*

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 100,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

**Behavioral Health System Baltimore supports SB 991 – Behavioral Health - Language Assistance Services Pilot Program.** This bill would create an important pilot program designed to provide improved access to behavioral health care to children with limited English proficiency. The bill provides a strong proposal to address this problem and ensure all children can access effective behavioral health care regardless of their background.

Language access is essential to effective behavioral health services. Effective counseling and therapy are predicated on communication and understanding. Describing symptoms, emotions, and coping skills requires nuance and clear terminology. This is exceedingly difficult if the language being spoken by the behavioral health professional is not well understood by the program participant.

Federal law requires access to accurate and effective language services for behavioral health care at no cost to children in immigrant families, but the quality of these services can be inconsistent. Most providers do not have bilingual staff and rely on a language line for interpretation. This service is done over the phone and can be difficult to follow. Much of the nuance and context crucial to behavioral health treatment may also be lost.<sup>1</sup>

The state should seek to develop programs that provide higher-quality language access to children needing behavioral health care. Foreign born children have often experienced difficult events such as fleeing violence and may need services.

In Baltimore, 10% of residents do not speak English at home and 4% have limited English proficiency. As an LBHA, it would be great to have more resources to devote to serving this population better. **BHSB urges the Senate Finance Committee to support SB 991.**

***For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142***

**References:**

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<sup>1</sup> Black, A; Polk, S; Ruiz, M; Sharfstein, J. “Speaking the Language: The Right to Interpretation & Translation Services for Children and Adolescents with Mental Health Needs in Maryland.” *The Public Justice Center; Centro SOL, Johns Hopkins University.* November 2022. Available at <https://www.publicjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Speaking-the-Language-Report.pdf>.