

HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
SB 991 - Behavioral Health - Language Assistance Services Pilot
Program

Senate Finance Committee
March 8, 2024



Health Care for the Homeless supports SB 991, which would establish the Language Assistance Services Pilot Program in the Behavioral Health Administration to provide grants to local behavioral health authorities to reimburse behavioral health providers for language assistance services for children with limited English proficiency (LEP) accessing behavioral health services. Importantly, the grants would provide funding for interpretation and translation services for parents and legal guardians who are coordinating behavioral health care for a child. There is a critical need for children with LEP to better access behavioral health services and language assistance services has been an immense barrier for providers to provide these services. This bill will begin to provide meaningful access to this vital care at a time when there is an immense shortage of behavioral health providers for children in the state.

At Health Care for the Homeless, our clients are among Maryland's most vulnerable – those experiencing homelessness or housing instability. In recent years, we have seen an increasing number of children with LEP that have complex behavioral health needs. We know that school-aged children who experience homelessness face significant mental health challenges that prevent students from focusing on their education, among other things. These challenges can result in students experiencing homelessness to become chronically absent from school. Even after just one year of chronic absenteeism, students are significantly less likely to complete high school.¹ These mental health challenges are exacerbated for children with LEP, as language is a significant barrier to receiving care.

Health Care for the Homeless is a federally qualified health center and, as such, we will never turn anyone away due to limited English proficiency and we ensure that every client – including children and their parents and legal guardians – have full translation services for all of their care. However, these language services are not free and we are increasingly needing to rely on these services. Every dollar we save and funding we receive goes directly back into the services we provide so we can continue to provide and expand care.

Financial sustainability aside, there are immense challenges with referrals for children with more complex behavioral health needs. When we need to refer a child for behavioral health care outside our practice, we oftentimes have difficulty finding a provider who will accept children specifically based on their LEP. Many providers will not accept children with LEP because the cost of translation is far too high. Some of these denials even come from community health centers, in violation of federal policy.²

¹ See, for instance, Stout, *Assessment of Maryland's Need for Eviction Prevention Funds (EPF) and the Estimated Fiscal Impact of EPF (2023)*, page 26, available at [Maryland's Need for Eviction Prevention Funds | Maryland Center on Economic Policy \(mdeconomy.org\)](https://www.mdeconomy.org/maryland-need-for-eviction-prevention-funds).

² Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 & Section 1557 of the Care Act, all mental health providers in Maryland who accept federal financial assistance for any of their programs or activities must provide language assistance services, including interpretation and translation, to individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP).

Having a funding mechanism for language access services for children with LEP will have an enormously beneficial impact on access to critical behavioral health care for this vulnerable population. We strongly urge a favorable report on SB 991.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing support services, and housing for over 11,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

Our Vision: Everyone is healthy and has a safe home in a just and respectful community.

Our Mission: We work to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it.

For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.