



TESTIMONY TO THE FINANCE COMMITTEE

SB0991: Behavioral Health- Language Assistance Services Pilot Program

POSITION: Support

BY: Linda Kohn, President

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The League of Women Voters believes that every U.S. resident -- adult and child -- should have access to affordable, high quality health care, including behavioral health care. The League also strongly supports efforts to increase health equity, believing that resource distribution and policy approaches should be based on fairness, giving everyone an equal opportunity to receive culturally-appropriate care.

Over 20% of Maryland families speak a language other than English at home.¹

When an individual with limited English proficiency (LEP) receives medical care delivered in an exclusively English-speaking environment, the language barrier can lead to fragmented care, misunderstood symptoms, and misinterpreted instructions resulting in poor patient outcomes.

Federal laws addressing language access, such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), **prohibit discrimination on the basis of national origin- which includes language.** These and other laws mandate that language services, including oral interpretation and written translation, be provided to enable all individuals to more fully access programs and care. In some healthcare facilities, language access is provided through a telephonic or computerized "language line" service.

However, "according to the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), **language access requirements under the ACA include...offering a developmentally appropriate language assistance program for children.**"² This may not be achieved by simply handing a telephone to a child who hardly understands English and is suffering with behavioral health challenges.

¹ <https://data.census.gov/profile/Maryland?g=040XX00US24>

² <https://jeenie.com/news/language-access-laws-comprehensive-guide/#:~:text=Title%20VI%20of%20the%20Civil%20Rights%20Act%20of%201964&text=Under%20Title%20VI%2C%20any%20organization,oral%20interpretation%20and%20written%20translation.>

SB 991 will create a pilot program to determine how best to remove language barriers, which constitute a preventable obstacle to accessing quality health care, for children who are receiving behavioral health care and their families. Better communication will lead to more trust, more adherence to treatment, and more positive outcomes for those children.

The League of Women Voters Maryland, representing 1,500+ members throughout Maryland, urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 991.