



**2024 SESSION
POSITION PAPER**

BILL: SB 991 - Behavioral Health - Language Assistance Services Pilot Program

COMMITTEE: Senate Finance Committee

POSITION: Letter of Information

BILL ANALYSIS: SB 991 would establish a Language Assistance Services Pilot Program in the Behavioral Health Administration in the Maryland Department of Health to provide grants to local behavioral health authorities to reimburse behavioral health providers for language assistance services for children and their caregivers with limited English proficiency.

POSITION RATIONALE: The Maryland Association of County Health Officers (MACHO) submits this Letter of Information regarding SB 991. The bill would establish a pilot program with the goal of improving access to behavioral health services for children with limited English proficiency and their caregivers. MACHO is strongly supportive of efforts to ensure that all Maryland residents have equitable access to behavioral health services, including access to language assistance services to ensure that people from all backgrounds can communicate effectively with healthcare providers.

There is a clear and growing need for language assistance services in healthcare settings. According to the American Community Survey, 5-Year estimates for 2018 - 2022:

- 3.3% of households in Maryland are linguistically isolated, meaning every member aged 14 years or older has some difficulty speaking English
- 19.8% of Marylanders aged five and over have a language other than English spoken at home

The bill establishes a pilot grant program where local behavioral health authorities (LBHAs) will apply for competitive funding that will be used to reimburse behavioral health providers for language assistance services if the providers meet certain program requirements. Although LBHAs will be required to establish a mechanism and dedicate staff time to review requests and process reimbursements, the bill language does not reference any direct funding support to LBHAs to manage the additional administrative responsibilities that will accompany this new programming. In the absence of dedicated funding to support this work, it will be a challenge for LBHAs to establish, staff, and administer these programs and may hinder progress toward the shared goal of improving equitable access to behavioral health services.

For these reasons, MACHO submits this letter of information for SB 991. For more information, please contact Ruth Maiorana, MACHO Executive Director, at rmaiora1@jhu.edu or 410-937-1433. *This communication reflects the position of MACHO.*