

Date: March 1, 2024

To: Delegate Acevero, Chair, Health and Government Operations Committee and All Committee Members

From: Katherine Lopez, Bilingual Program Administrator, The Arc Prince George's County

Subject: SUPPORT HB 987

Dear Committee:

I am grateful that you are considering HB 987, State Government – Equal Access to Public Services for Individuals with Limited English Proficiency – Modifications. I am writing to ask you to support this bill.

House Bill 987 addresses an issue of paramount importance: the guarantee of equal access to vital public services regardless of language proficiency. By establishing clear requirements for State departments, agencies, and programs, this bill lays the groundwork for a more inclusive and just society. Furthermore, it outlines comprehensive steps to facilitate language access, including the development of language access plans, the provision of oral language services and translations of vital documents, and the dissemination of multilingual guides to assist individuals with language English proficiency. These initiatives are crucial in bridging linguistic barriers and empowering marginalized communities to fully engage with and benefit from public services.

As a disability service professional, this bill is especially important to me because reaching equity by serving families with limited English proficiency, especially those who are Spanish Speaking, is extremely necessary in the State of Maryland. My experience working with these families has not been easy as we are one of the few organizations in Prince George's County that serves Spanish-speaking families. When these families come to me for help, I find that they are being underserved and they are completely lost in the process of applying for state and federal benefits for their loved ones.

I am proud to say that at The Arc we have been able to educate and put people at ease. However, we are still facing many obstacles as many state agencies and service providers in our state do not have bilingual staff – nor do they have printed materials translated into Spanish.

I have noticed that many state agencies have access to interpretation services to support Spanish-Speaking families, but refuse to use the services when necessary. Lastly, having a translation system doesn't necessarily mean that you are fully serving these families. Although these agencies with translation systems are doing better than others, hiring an interpreter from outside the organization to deliver information about their agency services isn't helpful because

the translations miss pertinent information that English-speakers receive. Families are negatively affected because they don't completely understand the information and materials they have been given; They are blamed when they do not follow-up.

If this bill were to move forward:

1. Families would feel supported and encouraged to apply for the state benefits they are eligible for. Most of these Spanish-speaking families are US citizens.
2. Families won't have to rely on other family members to translate/interpret information for them – especially their children who feel the brunt and anxiety brought on by trying to handle adult affairs.
3. Families will not receive blame for not following-up. They will be able to provide feedback and request assistance.
4. Translated materials will be in a format that is accessible for families with low-literacy.
5. Equity for all.

In conclusion, I urge all stakeholders to support House Bill 987 and take decisive action to ensure its swift passage. By enacting this bill into law, we affirm our collective commitment to upholding the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their linguistic background. Together, let us build a more inclusive and equitable society for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Katherine Lopez

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