

Disability Coalition for Language Access

HB0987 – State Government – Equal Access to Public Services for Individuals With Limited English Proficiency - Modifications

Hearing of the Health and Government Operations Committee, March 5, 2024

Position: Favorable

On behalf of the following 26 Maryland disability organizations, I urge you to support HB0987, which will require state agencies to create and enforce language access plans, providing translated materials and interpretation services, with built-in mechanisms for compliance monitoring and improvement:

***Enriqueciendo Vidas* coalition member organizations**

The Jubilee Association of Maryland
Disability Rights Maryland
The Parents' Place of MD
The Arc Maryland
Autism Society of Maryland
Independence Now
The Arc Prince George's County
Amigo Care ABA
Montgomery Disability Advocates
Montgomery County Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health
Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County
Partnership for Extraordinary Minds (xMinds)
Choice and Control Inc.
Avanzos Educational and Behavioral Services LLC
JSSA
Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington - Office of Deaf and Disabilities Ministries
Community Options, Inc.

Other Maryland disability organizations

People On the Go Maryland
Ethiopian Eritrean Special Needs Community
Chinese American Parent Association's Special Education Equal Development Society (SEEDS)
Korean American Disabled People's Association
SEEC
Autism Society of Baltimore-Chesapeake
Maryland Medical Management and Rehabilitation Services
The Arc Montgomery County
Easterseals DC MD VA

As organizations committed to supporting individuals with disabilities, we understand the significant impact of language barriers on accessing crucial state services. The *Enriqueciendo Vidas* coalition recently highlighted demographic disparities among Hispanic individuals with

disabilities in a letter to state leaders¹. The data revealed inequitable access for Hispanic people to vocational rehabilitation services, Autism Waiver services, housing opportunities, and DDA's Home and Community Based Services waiver programs. We expect that a similar lack of access exists for other immigrant communities due to language barriers.

Examples illustrate the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities due to inadequate language access. For instance, despite completing DDA's application in Spanish and requesting communication in Spanish, families are still sent an eligibility determination letter in English. On the eligibility letter is a phone number to call to receive language services. When someone calls that number, the recorded message is only in English with no options for language assistance. Moreover, the lack of interpretation services at public information sessions prevents individuals from accessing essential resources, exacerbating feelings of exclusion and frustration.

The Equal Access to Public Services for Individuals With Limited English Proficiency Bill addresses these challenges by mandating state agencies to develop Language Access Plans. These plans aim to eliminate communication barriers and foster inclusivity for individuals with disabilities, regardless of linguistic background. Incorporating compliance mechanisms within the bill is crucial to ensure accountability and remove persistent barriers.

We urge you to champion HB0987, recognizing its potential to significantly enhance the lives of individuals with disabilities in our community. Your support in advancing this bill will promote equity and accessibility for all residents.

Given Maryland's diversity, robust language access services in state agencies are essential to meet the varied linguistic needs of its population. We urge favorable action on HB0987 to advance equity and accessibility. For more information, please contact Lisa Lorraine, Breaking Barriers Senior Manager at the Jubilee Association of Maryland: 240-531-3478, llorraine@jubileemd.org.

¹ <https://www.jubileemd.org/download/enriqueciendo-vidas-advocacy-letter-october-2023-english-language/>