



March 1, 2024

Written Testimony for House Bill 0987 State Government - Equal Access to Public Services for Individuals With Limited English Proficiency – Modifications

Position: Favorable with amendments (FWA)

As one of Maryland’s health literacy experts, I support HB 0987 with amendments as an important step toward language access and information accessibility for all Maryland residents. The bill will strengthen Maryland’s currently recommended but not mandatory language access policy framework. It designates a state agency to provide oversight and enforcement powers, which are necessary to achieve the bill’s goals, and requires coordinators in the named agencies to develop plans, policies and procedures, and manage implementation and reporting.

I suggest three amendments to HB 0987 so that language access work by public agencies is coordinated and aligned with ongoing efforts.

- The first amendment is to incorporate in HB 0987 the plain language and language access requirements already in the Consumer Health Information – Hub and Requirements (HB 1082) law.
  - In 2022, the Maryland General Assembly directed the UMD Horowitz Center for Health Literacy to serve as the state’s consumer health information hub and increase the amount of plain language materials and language access. The Center already works with state and local public agencies to create plain language materials and increase language access for health, safety, health insurance and social services benefits information. Integrating HB 1082 requirements in HB 0987 will strengthen both.
- The second amendment is to include in HB 0987 a plain language requirement for all public information for consumer use from the covered agencies. The Consumer Health Information Hub law (HB 1082) only covers health, safety, health insurance and social services benefits information.
- The third amendment is to incorporate in HB 0987 reference to the Department of Budget and Management’s Statewide Foreign Language Interpretation/Translation Services. This is a contract mechanism that provides low cost certified translation and interpretation services to public agencies. Recommending that agencies use this mechanism will increase agencies’ awareness of this service and help bring consistency in the quality of translation and interpretation services.

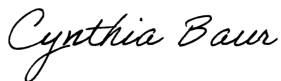
Adding a plain language requirement to HB 0987 is essential to make the investment in translation and interpretation services meaningful and effective. The National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services from the federal Office of Minority Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, clearly state that making information easy to understand is part of language access.

The Maryland Consumer Health Information Hub as created by HB 1082 was necessary because a large amount of Maryland public information is too dense, complex and jargon-filled to be useful to the average Marylander with average literacy and numeracy skills. Certified translators and interpreters are required to translate or interpret the source material as written or spoken, and they often report that the source materials are not in plain language. If HB 0987 requires translation and interpretation of these same dense, complex, and jargon-filled materials, then Maryland residents who need language access services will still struggle to comprehend the information in their native language.

Plain language AND language access are minimum requirements to help Maryland residents with Limited English Proficiency. Although they may find a webpage in Spanish, Chinese, Korean, or French, they may not be able to read and understand the large amount of technical information and acronyms, follow the directions to complete forms, or identify the services and programs to help with housing, employment, and education. Or, residents with limited English Proficiency may have an interpreter who accurately interprets what a public employee says and still not understand the meaning of the information if the employee uses technical language, agency acronyms, and unfamiliar program names.

I urge the Health and Government Operations Committee to make these necessary amendments to HB 0987 and vote favorably to move this bill out of committee.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cynthia Baur".

Cynthia Baur