



**Metropolitan
Washington Ear**

Committee: Senate Finance Committee

Bill Number: Senate Bill 208 – Human Services – Maryland Assistive Technology Program – Establishment

Hearing Date: January 29, 2025

Position: Support

Metropolitan Washington Ear, Inc. (MWE) located in Silver Spring, Maryland, is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization incorporated under the laws of the State of Maryland. MWE provides reading and information services, and independent living skills training for blind, visually impaired, and physically disabled people who cannot effectively read print, see plays, watch television programs and films, or view museum exhibits. Established in 1974, we've been providing quality services throughout Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia for more than 50 years. As an organization that serves the disabled community and fights for access for our community, we **SUPPORT** SB 208.

SB 208 would establish the Maryland Assistive Technology Program in the Department of Disabilities. This program would increase access to assistive technology services and devices for individuals with disabilities of all ages; including underrepresented populations and ensure statewide access to assistive technology lending libraries. Finally, the legislation would establish the Assistive Technology Services Fund.

Blind and visually impaired users benefit from the use of assistive technologies. It allows them to be on a level playing field with users not affected by low vision impairment. These technologies help create a more inclusive and equitable environment for everyone involved. Some of the most significant benefits of assistive technology for blind and visually impaired people include access to information, increased independence, enhanced communication, educational and employment opportunities, and social and communication inclusion.

There are dozens of assistive technology solutions and technologies that individuals who are blind and visually impaired use daily. These assistive technology devices include magnifiers, speech-to-text software, mobility aids, screen readers, and braille displays – to name a few. These devices help people with visual impairments access information, use technology, and navigate their environment. Yet, these devices tend to be unaffordable for many, which causes a significant barrier to accessing information and reading independently, as braille displays can be quite expensive, ranging from several hundred dollars to thousands of dollars — putting them out of reach for many individuals with low incomes.¹ If passed, SB 208 would help

¹ <https://solve.mit.edu/solutions/68736#:~:text=braille%20from%20becoming%20commonplace.%20Majority%20of%20blind,access%20to%20rare%20books%20thus%20eventually%20never>

to close gaps in the access to assistive technology devices for many Marylanders who might not be able to afford these devices.

Additionally, the ability for statewide access to assistive technology lending libraries outlined in this legislation will allow individuals with disabilities and their supporters to learn about, try, and borrow assistive technology devices through short-term loans, enabling those with disabilities to live, work, learn, and play more independently.

Finally, the special, nonlapsing fund administered through the creation of the Maryland Assistive Technology Program in SB 208 will provide an ongoing source of revenue to continue to fund this vital program once established.

For these reasons, MWE **supports SB 208** and **asks the committee for a favorable report**.

If we can provide any additional information, please contact Jocelyn I. Collins at jcollins@policypartners.net.