

**Department of Legislative Services**  
Maryland General Assembly  
2018 Session

**FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE**  
**First Reader**

Senate Bill 482  
Finance

(Senator Astle, *et al.*)

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**Remote Access Information Program for Deaf-Blind Individuals - Establishment**

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This bill establishes the Remote Access Information Program for Deaf-Blind Individuals. The Department of Information Technology (DoIT) must consult with the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD) to establish and administer the program. The purpose of the program is to use remote assistive technology, as defined by the bill, to connect specified deaf-blind individuals with a human assistant to provide real-time information through an accessible platform that would not otherwise be available. The program must be funded as provided in the State budget.

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**Fiscal Summary**

**State Effect:** The bill likely cannot be implemented in its current form within the five-year period covered by this fiscal and policy note for several reasons, including that the remote assistive technology described by the bill is not available for purchase.

**Local Effect:** The bill does not directly affect local government operations or finances.

**Small Business Effect:** None.

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**Analysis**

**Bill Summary:** DoIT must, in consultation with MDOD, adopt regulations governing the program, including eligibility requirements for deaf-blind individuals, as defined by the bill, to participate in the program. In administering the program, (1) MDOD must contract with an appropriate nonprofit entity to provide the remote assistive technology needed for the program and (2) DoIT must provide an annual payment to MDOD for the cost of the remote assistive technology.

The bill defines “remote assistive technology” as technology that provides visual and environmental information and at a minimum:

- uses the Internet to provide a connection between a deaf-blind individual and a human assistant;
- uses a mobile data connection that does not require the use of stationary or user-supplied wireless local area networking and, where possible, receives priority traffic handling from the service provider to ensure minimal delay in information transmittal;
- provides a mechanism allowing for hands-free transmission of video to the remote human assistant providing a sufficient visual field to permit the delivery of information immediately in front of and slightly to either side of the deaf-blind user, which is optimally a visual field encompassing 60 degrees in front of the user; and
- allows for the use of the camera on a mobile device in situations in which the hands-free option is not appropriate.

**Current Law/Background:** DoIT and MDOD estimate that approximately 600 individuals qualify as deaf-blind in the State.

In 1998, the U.S. Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 to require federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology (EIT) accessible to people with disabilities. The law (29 U.S.C. § 794 (d)) applies to all federal agencies when they develop, procure, maintain, or use EIT. Under Section 508, agencies must give disabled employees and members of the public access to information that is comparable to access available to others.

The Secretary of Information Technology has numerous duties related to the development, review, maintenance, and procurement of information technology (IT) projects and services, including adopting by regulation and enforcing nonvisual access standards to be used in the procurement of IT services. The current regulations governing nonvisual access standards are similar to many (but not all) of the standards required by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

The AIRA Technology Corporation (AIRA) develops remote assistive technology that connects the blind with a network of certified agents via wearable smart glasses and an augmented reality dashboard that allows agents to see the blind person’s environment in real time. The agents serve as visual interpreters for the blind, helping them accomplish a wide range of daily tasks and activities.

**State Expenditures:** DoIT and MDOD both advise that the “remote assistive technology” described by the bill is not available for purchase. Furthermore, through consultation with

their own and outside experts, both agencies advise that the technology that is available, exclusively from AIRA, does not meet the bill's technical specifications and is unlikely to be of assistance to most of the individuals in the deaf-blind community because it requires some degree of hearing in order to be effective.

Implementation of the bill is further complicated because AIRA is a for-profit business, and the bill requires MDOD to contract with a nonprofit in order to provide the remote assistive technology. It is unclear at this time whether AIRA would be willing to partner with a nonprofit organization that would then provide the technology to the Remote Access Information Program.

To the extent that more advanced technology becomes available and MDOD is able to locate a nonprofit entity to serve as an intermediary, costs increase for MDOD and DoIT to purchase the technology and for DoIT to hire additional staff to administer the program. *For informational purposes only*, MDOD advises that AIRA's business model is a monthly subscription plan that includes its technology and access to its agents. Costs for the plan range from \$89 a month (for 200 minutes of services) to \$329 a month (for an unlimited number of minutes of service). If AIRA were to provide service to all 600 deaf-blind individuals in the State with an unlimited number of minutes of service, the annual cost would be \$2.4 million.

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### **Additional Information**

**Prior Introductions:** None.

**Cross File:** None.

**Information Source(s):** Department of Information Technology; Maryland School for the Deaf; Maryland Department of Disabilities; Department of Legislative Services

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