

SENATE BILL 685

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5lr3206
CF HB 983

By: **Senator Augustine**

Introduced and read first time: January 26, 2025

Assigned to: Education, Energy, and the Environment

Committee Report: Favorable with amendments

Senate action: Adopted

Read second time: March 17, 2025

CHAPTER _____

1 AN ACT concerning

2 **Election Law – Local Boards of Elections – ~~Language Related Assistance~~**
3 **Language Assistance Program**

4 FOR the purpose of ~~requiring the State Board of Elections to determine whether there is a~~
5 ~~significant and substantial need for language related assistance in certain~~
6 ~~languages by a local board of elections during an election based on certain criteria;~~
7 ~~requiring local boards to provide certain language related assistance and materials~~
8 ~~in voting and elections to certain voters in certain languages; requiring local boards~~
9 ~~to make reasonable efforts to recruit election judges who are fluent in certain~~
10 ~~languages; and generally relating to language related assistance~~ establishing the
11 Language Assistance Program; requiring a local board of elections to participate in
12 the Program if the State Board determines that there is a significant need for
13 language assistance to voters in the county in a language other than English;
14 requiring the State Board to designate, not later than a certain date, certain
15 languages other than English in which a local board that is required to participate
16 in the Program must provide assistance to voters; requiring a local board that is
17 required to participate in the Program to provide, with oversight from the State
18 Board, certain language-related services to voters; and generally relating to the
19 Language Assistance Program.

20 BY adding to

21 Article – Election Law

22 Section 15.5–101 through ~~15.5–106~~ 15.5–104 to be under the new title “Title 15.5.

23 ~~Language Related Assistance~~ Language Assistance Program”

24 Annotated Code of Maryland

EXPLANATION: CAPITALS INDICATE MATTER ADDED TO EXISTING LAW.

[Brackets] indicate matter deleted from existing law.

Underlining indicates amendments to bill.

~~Strike out~~ indicates matter stricken from the bill by amendment or deleted from the law by amendment.



(2022 Replacement Volume and 2024 Supplement)

SECTION 1. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF MARYLAND,
That the Laws of Maryland read as follows:

Article – Election Law

**TITLE 15.5. ~~LANGUAGE-RELATED ASSISTANCE~~ LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM.**

15.5–101.

(A) IN THIS TITLE THE FOLLOWING WORDS HAVE THE MEANINGS INDICATED.

(B) “DESIGNATED LANGUAGE” MEANS A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH IN WHICH THE STATE BOARD DETERMINES A LOCAL BOARD IS REQUIRED TO PROVIDE ASSISTANCE TO VOTERS UNDER THIS TITLE.

(C) “LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY” MEANS THAT AN INDIVIDUAL:

(1) SPEAKS A PARTICULAR LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH;

(2) DOES NOT SPEAK ENGLISH AS A PRIMARY LANGUAGE; AND

(3) SPEAKS, READS, OR UNDERSTANDS THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LESS THAN “VERY WELL”, AS REPORTED IN AVAILABLE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU DATA OR DATA OF COMPARABLE QUALITY COLLECTED BY A PUBLIC OFFICE.

(D) “PROGRAM” MEANS THE LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM.

(E) “VOTING MATERIALS” INCLUDES:

(1) STATEWIDE VOTER REGISTRATION APPLICATIONS;

(2) STATE BOARD APPROVED ABSENTEE BALLOT APPLICATIONS;

(3) SPECIMEN BALLOTS; AND

(4) FORMS AND INSTRUCTIONS THAT THE STATE BOARD DETERMINES NECESSARY TO VOTING.

15.5–102.

(A) THERE IS A LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM.

1 **(B) A LOCAL BOARD SHALL PARTICIPATE IN THE PROGRAM IF THE STATE**
2 **BOARD DETERMINES IN ACCORDANCE WITH SUBSECTION (C) OF THIS SECTION THAT**
3 **THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT NEED FOR LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE TO VOTERS IN THE**
4 **COUNTY IN A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH.**

5 **(C) THE STATE BOARD SHALL DETERMINE NOT LATER THAN FEBRUARY 1**
6 **OF THE YEAR OF THE ELECTION THAT A SIGNIFICANT NEED FOR LANGUAGE**
7 **ASSISTANCE TO VOTERS EXISTS IN A COUNTY IF, BASED ON THE BEST AVAILABLE**
8 **DATA, INCLUDING INFORMATION FROM THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU'S AMERICAN**
9 **COMMUNITY SURVEY OR DATA OF COMPARABLE QUALITY COLLECTED BY A PUBLIC**
10 **OFFICE:**

11 **(1) MORE THAN 2% OF THE CITIZEN VOTING AGE POPULATION OF THE**
12 **COUNTY:**

13 **(I) USE A SINGLE SHARED LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH;**
14 **AND**

15 **(II) HAVE LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY; OR**

16 **(2) MORE THAN 4,000 INDIVIDUALS OF THE CITIZEN VOTING AGE**
17 **POPULATION OF THE COUNTY USE A SINGLE SHARED LANGUAGE OTHER THAN**
18 **ENGLISH AND HAVE LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY.**

19 **(D) THE STATE BOARD SHALL DETERMINE THAT EACH LANGUAGE OTHER**
20 **THAN ENGLISH THAT IS USED BY AT LEAST THE NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS SPECIFIED**
21 **IN SUBSECTION (C) OF THIS SECTION IS A DESIGNATED LANGUAGE.**

22 **(E) (1) THE STATE BOARD SHALL PUBLISH AND MAINTAIN ON ITS**
23 **WEBSITE A LIST OF:**

24 **(I) EACH LOCAL BOARD THAT IS REQUIRED TO PROVIDE**
25 **LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE IN A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH; AND**

26 **(II) EACH DESIGNATED LANGUAGE IN WHICH THE LANGUAGE**
27 **ASSISTANCE IS REQUIRED TO BE PROVIDED BY THE LOCAL BOARD.**

28 **(2) THE STATE BOARD SHALL UPDATE THE INFORMATION**
29 **PUBLISHED AND MAINTAINED UNDER PARAGRAPH (1) OF THIS SUBSECTION AT**
30 **LEAST EVERY 2 YEARS.**

31 **(F) THE STATE ADMINISTRATOR SHALL PROMPTLY NOTIFY EACH LOCAL**
32 **BOARD AND THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER OF THE COUNTY INCLUDED ON THIS**

1 LIST UNDER SUBSECTION (E) OF THIS SECTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THIS
2 TITLE.

3 15.5-103.

4 (A) EACH LOCAL BOARD THAT IS REQUIRED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE
5 PROGRAM SHALL, WITH OVERSIGHT FROM THE STATE BOARD, PROVIDE TO VOTERS
6 THE SERVICES DESCRIBED IN THIS SECTION.

7 (B) (1) AT EACH EARLY VOTING CENTER AND ELECTION DAY POLLING
8 PLACE, A VOTER WHO HAS A NEED FOR LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE IN A DESIGNATED
9 LANGUAGE SHALL HAVE THE OPTION TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE ELECTION
10 JUDGES THROUGH A TRANSLATOR.

11 (2) THE STATE SHALL PROVIDE TO THE LOCAL BOARDS LICENSED
12 TRANSLATION SOFTWARE SERVICES TO IMPLEMENT THE PROGRAM AND THE
13 COUNTY SHALL PAY FOR ALL OTHER EXPENSES ASSOCIATED WITH THE PROGRAM,
14 INCLUDING NECESSARY HARDWARE AND EACH USE OF THE TRANSLATION
15 SOFTWARE SERVICES.

16 (C) SUBJECT TO SUBSECTION (E) OF THIS SECTION, THE LOCAL BOARD
17 SHALL POST STATE BOARD APPROVED SIGNAGE IN EACH EARLY VOTING CENTER
18 AND ELECTION DAY POLLING PLACE IN EACH DESIGNATED LANGUAGE NOTIFYING
19 VOTERS THAT LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE AND INTERPRETATION SERVICES ARE
20 AVAILABLE.

21 (D) SUBJECT TO SUBSECTION (E) OF THIS SECTION, THE LOCAL BOARD
22 SHALL PROVIDE ONLINE VOTING MATERIALS IN EACH DESIGNATED LANGUAGE.

23 (E) A LOCAL BOARD MAY PROVIDE SOLELY ORAL INSTRUCTIONS OR OTHER
24 ASSISTANCE IF THE LANGUAGE DOES NOT HAVE A WRITTEN FORM, SUCH AS
25 AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE.

26 (F) THE LOCAL BOARD SHALL MAKE REASONABLE EFFORTS TO RECRUIT
27 BILINGUAL ELECTION JUDGES TO PROVIDE ASSISTANCE TO VOTERS IN DESIGNATED
28 LANGUAGES.

29 (G) THE LOCAL BOARD, WITH STATE BOARD APPROVAL, MAY PROVIDE
30 LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE SERVICES THAT ARE IN ADDITION TO THE LANGUAGE
31 ASSISTANCE SERVICES REQUIRED IN THIS SECTION.

32 15.5-104.

33 THE STATE BOARD SHALL ADOPT REGULATIONS TO CARRY OUT THIS TITLE.

1 SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That, on or before January 1, 2026,
 2 the State Board of Elections shall publish on its website the information required under §
 3 15.5-102(e) of the Election Law Article, as enacted by Section 1 of this Act.

4 ~~IN THIS TITLE, "LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY" MEANS THAT AN~~
 5 ~~INDIVIDUAL:~~

6 ~~(1) SPEAKS A PARTICULAR LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH;~~

7 ~~(2) DOES NOT SPEAK ENGLISH AS A PRIMARY LANGUAGE; AND~~

8 ~~(3) SPEAKS, READS, OR UNDERSTANDS THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE~~
 9 ~~LESS THAN "VERY WELL", AS REPORTED IN AVAILABLE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU DATA~~
 10 ~~OR DATA OF COMPARABLE QUALITY COLLECTED BY A PUBLIC OFFICE.~~

11 ~~15.5-102.~~

12 ~~(A) SUBJECT TO SUBSECTION (B) OF THIS SECTION, THE STATE BOARD~~
 13 ~~SHALL DETERMINE WHETHER THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT AND SUBSTANTIAL NEED~~
 14 ~~FOR LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE IN ONE OR MORE LANGUAGES OTHER THAN~~
 15 ~~ENGLISH BY A LOCAL BOARD DURING AN ELECTION.~~

16 ~~(B) THE STATE BOARD SHALL DETERMINE THAT A SIGNIFICANT AND~~
 17 ~~SUBSTANTIAL NEED FOR LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE BY A LOCAL BOARD~~
 18 ~~DURING AN ELECTION EXISTS IN A COUNTY IF, BASED ON THE BEST AVAILABLE~~
 19 ~~DATA, INCLUDING INFORMATION FROM THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU'S AMERICAN~~
 20 ~~COMMUNITY SURVEY OR DATA OF COMPARABLE QUALITY COLLECTED BY A PUBLIC~~
 21 ~~OFFICE:~~

22 ~~(1) MORE THAN 2%, BUT IN NO INSTANCE FEWER THAN 100~~
 23 ~~INDIVIDUALS, OF THE VOTING AGE POPULATION OF THE COUNTY:~~

24 ~~(I) USE A SINGLE SHARED LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH;~~
 25 ~~AND~~

26 ~~(H) HAVE LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY; OR~~

27 ~~(2) MORE THAN 4,000 INDIVIDUALS OF THE VOTING AGE POPULATION~~
 28 ~~OF THE COUNTY USE A SINGLE SHARED LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH AND HAVE~~
 29 ~~LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY.~~

30 ~~(C) THE STATE BOARD MAY ADOPT REGULATIONS THAT ESTABLISH~~
 31 ~~ADDITIONAL CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING WHETHER A SIGNIFICANT AND~~

~~1 SUBSTANTIAL NEED FOR LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE BY A LOCAL BOARD
2 DURING AN ELECTION EXISTS IN A COUNTY.~~

~~3 15.5-103.~~

~~4 (A) ON OR BEFORE JANUARY 1, 2026, AND EVERY 2 YEARS THEREAFTER,
5 THE STATE BOARD SHALL PUBLISH AND MAINTAIN ON ITS WEBSITE A LIST OF:~~

~~6 (1) EACH LOCAL BOARD THAT IS REQUIRED TO PROVIDE
7 LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE IN A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH; AND~~

~~8 (2) EACH LANGUAGE IN WHICH THE LANGUAGE RELATED
9 ASSISTANCE IS REQUIRED TO BE PROVIDED BY THE LOCAL BOARD.~~

~~10 (B) THE STATE BOARD SHALL DISTRIBUTE THIS LIST TO EACH LOCAL
11 BOARD IN TIME TO ALLOW LOCAL BOARDS TO PROVIDE LANGUAGE RELATED
12 ASSISTANCE UNDER § 15.5-104 OF THIS TITLE.~~

~~13 15.5-104.~~

~~14 (A) A LOCAL BOARD SHALL PROVIDE LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE
15 AND MATERIALS IN VOTING AND ELECTIONS TO VOTERS WHO HAVE LIMITED
16 ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IN EACH LANGUAGE DESIGNATED BY THE STATE BOARD
17 UNDER § 15.5-102 OF THIS TITLE.~~

~~18 (B) WHENEVER THE STATE BOARD DETERMINES THAT
19 LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE SHALL BE PROVIDED BY A LOCAL BOARD, THE
20 LOCAL BOARD SHALL PROVIDE COMPETENT ASSISTANCE AND PHYSICAL AND
21 ONLINE VOTING MATERIALS IN EACH DESIGNATED LANGUAGE UNDER § 15.5-102 OF
22 THIS TITLE.~~

~~23 (C) (1) EXCEPT AS PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH (2) OF THIS SUBSECTION,
24 FOR EACH DESIGNATED LANGUAGE UNDER § 15.5-102 OF THIS TITLE, THE
25 LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE AND MATERIALS SHALL INCLUDE:~~

~~26 (I) TRANSLATED REGISTRATION AND VOTING FORMS AND
27 NOTICES;~~

~~28 (II) ELECTION RELATED MATERIALS;~~

~~29 (III) SIGNAGE AT ALL EARLY VOTING CENTERS AND POLLING
30 PLACES IN DESIGNATED LANGUAGES NOTIFYING VOTERS THAT LANGUAGE
31 ASSISTANCE AND TELEPHONE INTERPRETERS ARE AVAILABLE; AND~~

1 ~~(IV) SAMPLE BALLOTS AND OTHER MATERIALS OR~~
2 ~~INFORMATION RELATING TO THE ELECTORAL PROCESS.~~

3 ~~(2) IN THE CASE OF A LANGUAGE THAT IS ORAL OR UNWRITTEN,~~
4 ~~INCLUDING SIGN LANGUAGE, THE LOCAL BOARD MAY PROVIDE ONLY ORAL~~
5 ~~INSTRUCTIONS, ASSISTANCE, OR OTHER INFORMATION RELATING TO THE~~
6 ~~ELECTORAL PROCESS IN THE APPLICABLE LANGUAGE.~~

7 ~~(D) (1) MATERIALS PROVIDED IN A DESIGNATED LANGUAGE SHALL:~~

8 ~~(I) BE OF AN EQUAL QUALITY TO THE CORRESPONDING~~
9 ~~ENGLISH LANGUAGE MATERIALS; AND~~

10 ~~(II) BE MADE AVAILABLE AT THE SAME TIME AS THE~~
11 ~~CORRESPONDING ENGLISH LANGUAGE MATERIALS.~~

12 ~~(2) ALL TRANSLATIONS SHALL CONVEY THE INTENT AND ESSENTIAL~~
13 ~~MEANING OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT OR COMMUNICATION AND MAY NOT SOLELY RELY~~
14 ~~ON AUTOMATIC ELECTRONIC TRANSLATION SERVICES, INCLUDING MACHINE~~
15 ~~TRANSLATION OR OTHER ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE APPLICATIONS.~~

16 ~~(3) (I) IN ADDITION TO THE OTHER REQUIREMENTS OF THIS~~
17 ~~SECTION, LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE SHALL INCLUDE THE PRESENCE OF~~
18 ~~BILINGUAL ELECTION JUDGES WHERE AVAILABLE.~~

19 ~~(II) A LOCAL BOARD SHALL MAKE REASONABLE EFFORTS TO~~
20 ~~RECRUIT ELECTION JUDGES WHO ARE FLUENT IN EACH LANGUAGE DESIGNATED BY~~
21 ~~THE STATE BOARD UNDER § 15.5-102 OF THIS TITLE, INCLUDING BY USING NOTICES~~
22 ~~IN NEWSPAPERS, RADIO, TELEVISION, AND OTHER FORMS OF MEDIA, WITH A~~
23 ~~PARTICULAR FOCUS ON MEDIA THAT SERVE NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING CITIZENS IN~~
24 ~~THE COUNTY.~~

25 ~~(III) BILINGUAL ELECTION JUDGES SHALL PROVIDE DIRECT~~
26 ~~ASSISTANCE TO VOTERS WHO HAVE LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND MAY NOT~~
27 ~~ATTEMPT TO INTERPRET OR TRANSLATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE MATERIALS.~~

28 ~~(E) THIS SECTION MAY NOT BE CONSTRUED TO PREVENT A LOCAL BOARD~~
29 ~~FROM VOLUNTARILY PROVIDING LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE IN ADDITION TO~~
30 ~~THE ASSISTANCE REQUIRED BY THIS TITLE.~~

31 ~~15.5-105.~~

32 ~~(A) THE STATE BOARD SHALL ADOPT REGULATIONS THAT ESTABLISH A~~
33 ~~REVIEW PROCESS TO DETERMINE WHETHER A SIGNIFICANT AND SUBSTANTIAL~~

1 ~~NEED EXISTS FOR A LANGUAGE TO BE DESIGNATED UNDER § 15.5-102 OF THIS~~
2 ~~TITLE.~~

3 ~~(B) THE PROCESS ESTABLISHED BY THE STATE BOARD UNDER SUBSECTION~~
4 ~~(A) OF THIS SECTION SHALL INCLUDE, AT MINIMUM:~~

5 ~~(1) AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE FOLLOWING TO REQUEST THAT THE~~
6 ~~STATE BOARD CONSIDER DESIGNATING A LANGUAGE UNDER § 15.5-102 OF THIS~~
7 ~~TITLE:~~

8 ~~(I) A VOTER;~~

9 ~~(II) A GROUP OF VOTERS;~~

10 ~~(III) AN ORGANIZATION WHOSE MEMBERSHIP INCLUDES VOTERS~~
11 ~~OR IS LIKELY TO INCLUDE VOTERS;~~

12 ~~(IV) AN ORGANIZATION WHOSE MISSION WOULD BE~~
13 ~~FRUSTRATED BY A FAILURE TO PROVIDE LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE UNDER~~
14 ~~THIS TITLE; AND~~

15 ~~(V) AN ORGANIZATION THAT WOULD EXPEND RESOURCES TO~~
16 ~~FULFILL THE ORGANIZATION'S MISSION AS A RESULT OF A FAILURE TO PROVIDE~~
17 ~~LANGUAGE RELATED ASSISTANCE UNDER THIS TITLE; AND~~

18 ~~(2) AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PUBLIC COMMENT.~~

19 ~~(C) ON RECEIPT OF A REQUEST AND CONSIDERATION OF ANY PUBLIC~~
20 ~~COMMENT, THE STATE BOARD SHALL DESIGNATE ANY LANGUAGE FOR WHICH IT~~
21 ~~DETERMINES THE CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION ARE MET.~~

22 ~~15.5-106.~~

23 ~~(A) THE FOLLOWING PERSONS MAY FILE AN ACTION TO ENFORCE THIS~~
24 ~~TITLE:~~

25 ~~(1) AN AGGRIEVED PERSON;~~

26 ~~(2) AN ORGANIZATION WHOSE MEMBERSHIP INCLUDES OR IS LIKELY~~
27 ~~TO INCLUDE AGGRIEVED PERSONS;~~

28 ~~(3) AN ORGANIZATION WHOSE MISSION WOULD BE FRUSTRATED BY A~~
29 ~~VIOLATION OF THIS SECTION;~~

1 ~~(4) AN ORGANIZATION THAT WOULD EXPEND RESOURCES TO FULFILL~~
2 ~~ITS MISSION AS A RESULT OF A VIOLATION OF THIS SECTION; OR~~

3 ~~(5) THE STATE BOARD.~~

4 ~~(b) (1) IN THE CASE OF A LOCAL BOARD THAT SEEKS TO PROVIDE ONLY~~
5 ~~ENGLISH LANGUAGE MATERIALS DESPITE A DETERMINATION BY THE STATE BOARD~~
6 ~~THAT THE LOCAL BOARD IS REQUIRED TO PROVIDE LANGUAGE RELATED~~
7 ~~ASSISTANCE UNDER THIS TITLE, THE LOCAL BOARD MAY FILE AN ACTION AGAINST~~
8 ~~THE STATE BOARD SEEKING A DECLARATORY JUDGMENT ALLOWING THE LOCAL~~
9 ~~BOARD TO PROVIDE ONLY ENGLISH LANGUAGE MATERIALS.~~

10 ~~(2) THE COURT SHALL ENTER THE DECLARATORY JUDGMENT IN~~
11 ~~FAVOR OF THE LOCAL BOARD ONLY IF THE COURT FINDS THAT THE DETERMINATION~~
12 ~~BY THE STATE BOARD WAS ARBITRARY AND CAPRICIOUS OR AN ABUSE OF~~
13 ~~DISCRETION.~~

14 ~~(c) THE ATTORNEY GENERAL MAY ISSUE SUBPOENAS AND HOLD~~
15 ~~FACT-FINDING HEARINGS TO ENFORCE THE PROVISIONS OF THIS TITLE.~~

16 SECTION ~~2~~ 3. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act shall take effect
17 October 1, 2025.

Approved:

Governor.

President of the Senate.

Speaker of the House of Delegates.