



**Independent Marylanders Achieving Growth through Empowerment**

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Michael Bullis, Executive Director

**DATE:** March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020

**BILL:** Senate Bill 851 – Human Services – Department of Disabilities – Accessibility Programs

**COMMITTEE:** Senate Finance Committee

**POSITION:** Support

Chair Kelley and Members of the Committee:

My name is Michael Bullis, speaking on behalf of Centers for Independent Living. I am also the Executive Director of The IMAGE Center of Maryland, the Independent Living Center that serves people with disabilities including those with speech communication disabilities in Baltimore and Harford Counties and the City of Baltimore.

We strongly support this move of TAM to the Department of Disabilities because that agency already has the mandate to serve all disabilities and has excellent constituent communication processes in place and provides direct services.

Centers for Independent Living serve people with all disabilities from throughout Maryland. Whether it is seniors losing vision or hearing, people unable to speak, or, younger people with significant physical disabilities, TAM is a resource we look to for practical solutions. Disability, often seen as an insurmountable problem, becomes manageable through programs like TAM, allowing people to maintain connection with the world around them.

Government works best when services are provided through agencies with strong citizen connection. The Department of Disabilities is well suited to provide these services. It has a strong responsive citizen Commission that provides the necessary sensitivity to consumer needs and this Bill also strengthens the agency by:

- Requiring that the Executive Director is an actual user of TAM services. The TAM Executive Director will have direct access to the Secretary of the Department of Disabilities and advise the Department. The TAM Executive Director will also serve as a member of the MDOD Executive Leadership Team.

The proposed legislation will cross-pollinate existing stakeholder groups to open channels of communication, by:

- Adding a representative from the Governor's Advisory Board for Telecommunications Relay as a standing member of MDOD's Advisory Board the Maryland Commission on Disabilities; adding a representative from the Maryland Commission on Disabilities as a standing member of the Governor's Advisory Board for Telecommunications Relay; and adding a representative from the Governor's Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing as a standing member of the Governor's Advisory Board for Telecommunications Relay.

We see few proposals that reflect such a strong effort to strengthen linkages with citizens and other related agencies.

The Centers for Independent Living urge a favorable report on SB851.