

**HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
HB 514/SB 413: MARYLAND LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION  
FUNDING -ABANDONED PROPERTY  
FEBRUARY 8, 2021**

**POSITION: SUPPORT**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Committee on behalf of Disability Rights Maryland (DRM, formerly known as Maryland Disability Law Center).

HB 514 and SB 413 would increase Maryland Legal Services Corporation's (MLSC) annual distribution from the Abandoned Property Fund from \$2 million to \$8 million. MLSC was created by the Maryland General Assembly in 1982 to be the state's primary funder of civil legal aid services to Marylanders with low incomes and in 1984 the Maryland General Assembly identified the Abandoned Property Fund as a funding source for MLSC in 1984. Increasing this amount would offer much needed funding and stability to the legal services delivery system.

MLSC currently provides funding to 36 nonprofit civil legal aid organizations across the state who rely on MLSC funding. DRM is one of these civil legal services organizations. MLSC is DRM's single largest funder.

DRM is the federally required, state designated Protection and Advocacy agency in Maryland, mandated to advance and protect the civil and human rights of people with disabilities throughout the state. We provide free legal services to Marylanders of any age with all types of disabilities (developmental, intellectual, psychiatric, physical, sensory, learning, traumatic brain injury, and more).

The pandemic has severely and disproportionality impacted people with disabilities, creating increased risk of eviction and homelessness, reduction in needed community services, healthcare complications, severe harm or death. As a result, DRM has experienced an exponential increase in the need for legal advocacy services to ensure that the vital and unique needs of people with disabilities are addressed. Highlights of DRM's work includes the following.

Parents of K-12 public school students with disabilities throughout Maryland are particularly in need of legal advice and representation to ensure their children have access to educational services particularly students for whom in person services are essential like "Miguel"<sup>1</sup> "Miguel", an 11-year-old student with autism, was unable to access distance learning without support and did not receive any education services for 11 months. His mother, a paramedic working 18-hour shifts, was not successful in securing in-person support for Miguel from the school. DRM then represented Miguel and the school system agreed to provide

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<sup>1</sup> Student's name is fictitious to protect confidentiality

the in-person support Miquel needed also hosts Facebook Live! Events on DRM's Facebook page on Wednesday nights to answer parents' questions about students' special education rights and protections during virtual learning, holding sessions in Spanish. This platform has been an excellent way to connect with families in desperate need of information and assistance during the school closures, and some of the videos from the live sessions have garnered over 1500 views.

During the pandemic DRM has sent numerous written recommendations, on behalf of people with disabilities, for needed policy revisions to the Governor and state agencies. For example, in August 2020, DRM with a Coalition of disability organizations sent a request to the Maryland Secretary of the Maryland Department of Health (MDH) and the Maryland Secretary of the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD) requesting that the State take further action to ensure that visitor and reasonable accommodation policies are adopted by health care facilities throughout the state to ensure that these facilities do not discriminate against patients and consumers with disabilities.

In late September 2020, the state agencies responded to the disability coalition and issued new directive and guidance documents regarding disability support personnel in health care facilities. Expanding rights protections from previous policy which applies to all licensed Maryland hospitals, related institutions, freestanding medical facilities, freestanding ambulatory care facilities, chronic disease centers, hospice care facilities, comprehensive rehabilitation facilities, nursing homes, and assisted living programs. DRM has taken on at least 6 cases in one Maryland hospital to make sure a Maryland hospital followed the policy.

Any reduction in funding from MLSC will seriously impair DRM's ability to maintain our current staffing level and significantly decrease our ability to provide essential advocacy, which serves to protect the health, safety and welfare of Marylanders with disabilities.

It is vitally important to secure additional funding for MLSC to address the significant increase in demand for legal advocacy services for Marylanders with very low incomes MLSC currently projects fiscal year 2022 revenue to come in at least \$6 million lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Multiple studies have shown that every dollar invested in civil legal services results in a \$6 return in the form of economic activity, cost savings and increased productivity – a return of hundreds of millions of dollars each year. I would be happy to provide any further information or answer questions, and can be reached at [RobinM@DisabilityRightsMD.org](mailto:RobinM@DisabilityRightsMD.org).

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robin C. Murphy". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Robin C Murphy  
Executive Director, Disability Rights Maryland