



# Welfare Advocates

Founded 1979

228 W. Lexington Street — Suite 220 • Baltimore, Maryland 21201-3432

Phone: 667.600.3356 • Fax: 410.889.0203

---

**House Bill 786**  
**Department of Human Services, Maryland Department of Health, and Department of Education –**  
**Easing Access to Family Support Programs**

**House Appropriations Committee**  
**February 10, 2021**

**Support**

Welfare Advocates is a statewide coalition of social service organizations, advocacy groups, faith communities, and community members, whose mission it is to educate ourselves, and the wider community and to advocate for an adequate safety net and public policies that support families moving towards economic stability.

**Welfare Advocates supports HB 786**, which requires the Secretary of Human Services, Secretary of Health and the State Superintendent to work together to simplify the application process across the programs they are responsible for that support low-income Marylander's called "Family Support Programs."

To our credit, Maryland provides a wide range of benefits to assist families who are experiencing economic hardship. However, because of their statutory construction and the federal funding sources, the programs are often siloed in a variety of departments at both the state and local level. This makes applying for the benefits a difficult and complicated process.

Advocates and service providers have long recognized this issue and we have seen incremental changes. In the 2010 Joint Chairman's Report, the Appropriations Committee formalized a group of advocates who had been meeting into the "No Wrong Door Working Group", required the relevant departments to participate and mandated a report. The No Wrong Door Workgroup met over two years and received funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation for a facilitator. The resulting 44 page report offered a number of recommendations for simplifying the application process.

However, at the same time the report was being produced the Affordable Care Act passed. The report was submitted to the General Assembly but, in follow up briefings and communications, this committee was informed that ACA would be a game changer and the report recommendations were unnecessary. The Exchange was going to screen for more than just healthcare benefits and the ACA made available funding to improve other benefit eligibility systems. Unfortunately, the promises of the Exchange never materialized and only incremental changes were made to simplify benefit application over the next ten years. For instance, MD SAIL was replaced with the more user-friendly interface MyDHR.

Yet again, we find ourselves at a critical opportunity point for simplifying applications. DHS is in the process of launching Maryland's Total Human-services Integrated Network (MD THINK), which is described as

a groundbreaking shared technology platform that will transform the state's ability to deliver vital human services to Marylanders. MD THINK is a cloud-based shared services platform and data repository that will break down traditional silos and data barriers between state agencies and provide integrated access to programs administered by agencies including Department of Human Services (DHS), the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS), the Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation and the Department of Health.<sup>1</sup>

While we are encouraged by the roll-out of this system, questions remain about functionality and reach. It is our hope that the initial promises of a fully integrated system will be realized; however, experience tells us that the roll out of technology platforms rarely live up to the hype. **We welcome HB 786 as a tool to move MD THINK forward towards its full potential and would recommend reframing the bill around the launch of MD THINK.**

**We also recommend:**

- **Striking the language on page 3, lines 8-10 which encourages automatic enrollment of families in support programs for which they qualify** - There are valid reasons why a family may want to decline a benefit including the effect it may have on their immigration status, the onerous and invasive requirements of a program, and self-determination. We strongly believe clients should be able to easily access the benefits for which they eligible, but an automated process is not the best way to do this.
- **Including all the human services agencies** – Department of Labor, Department of Housing and Community Development and the Department of Aging all have family support programs.
- **Adding a requirement to examine language access as part of application improvement** – Poor translations have been a systematic problem. Either the application is translated at a very high reading level or words are translated incorrectly. For instance, in one of the recent vaccine registration pages “race” was translated using the word for “an event you run.”

**For the reasons stated above, we respectfully urge a favorable report on HB 786 and hope the committee will consider our suggestions.** Thank you for your consideration.

Submitted by Regan Vaughan

---

<sup>1</sup> Maryland Department of Human Services. <https://dhs.maryland.gov/mdthink/faq/>

---