

**Date:** March 8, 2023

**To:** Delegate Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk, Chair, Health and Government Operations Committee and All Committee Members

**From:** Katherine Lopez, Bilingual Program Administrator, The Arc Prince George's County

**Subject:** SUPPORT HB 1144

Dear Committee:

I am grateful that you are considering HB 1144, State Government – Equal Access to Public Services for Individuals With 3 Limited English Proficiency – Modifications. I am writing to ask you to support this bill.

As a disability service professional, this bill is especially important to me because reaching equity by serving families with limited English proficiency, especially those who are Spanish Speaking, is extremely necessary in the State of Maryland. My experience working with these families has not been easy as we are one of the few organizations in Prince George's County that serves Spanish-speaking families. When these families come to me for help, I find that they are being underserved and they are completely lost in the process of applying for state and federal benefits for their loved ones.

I am proud to say that at The Arc we have been able to educate and put people at ease . However, we are still facing many obstacles as many state agencies and service providers in our state do not have bilingual staff – nor do they have printed materials translated into Spanish.

I have noticed that many state agencies have access to interpretation services to support Spanish-Speaking families, but refuse to use the services when necessary. Lastly, having a translation system doesn't necessarily mean that you are fully serving these families. Although these agencies with translation systems are doing better than others, hiring an interpreter from outside the organization to deliver information about their agency services isn't helpful because the translations miss pertinent information that English-speakers receive. Families are negatively affected because they don't completely understand the information and materials they have been given; They are blamed when they do not follow-up.

Besides my experience, I would also like to share a story of one of the 100 Spanish-speaking families I am currently serving. This is about Ms. A, a mother with low-literacy and limited English proficiency, who has a 21-year-old child with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Her child graduated from high school last year but is just starting the process of applying for Maryland State benefits. While her child was in school, she was informed of these benefits but her low-literacy and lack of English proficiency prevented her from fully understanding the process and what these benefits look like after graduation. Her experience has been extremely

hard. Every time she felt encouraged to start the application process, she would quickly become discouraged, because there was no one who was available to fully support her through the process. She has shared that whenever she requested a Spanish speaker, she was told to “wait” and one was never provided.

This complicated process on top of the inconveniences faced has made the mom feel overwhelmed. She was unable to understand and navigate the resources that were provided to her. Her child spent several months missing out on services and was not living to his fullest potential. After personally assisting this family, I am happy to say that we are finally making progress in her application processes. However, the lack of bilingual staff in state agencies negatively affects us all, as the case load is too large for just me to manage in my one organization. I have to be present for every step of the transition process in order to provide interpretation and support to these families, since other state agencies do not have the human resources for this.

If this bill were to move forward:

1. Families would feel supported and encouraged to apply for the state benefits they are eligible for. Most of these Spanish-speaking families are US citizens.
2. Families won't have to rely on other family members to translate/interpret information for them – especially their children who feel the brunt and anxiety brought on by trying to handle adult affairs.
3. Families will not receive blame for not following-up. They will be able to provide feedback and request assistance.
4. Translated materials will be in a format that is accessible for families with low-literacy.
5. Equity for all.

Passing HB 1144 would make a significant difference for families like Ms. A's. It would ensure that everyone in the state is fully served and that there is equity for all. I urge you to support HB 1144 and help Marylanders succeed.

Sincerely,  
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