



House Bill 1144
State Government - Equal Access to Public Services for Individuals
With Limited English Proficiency - Modifications
March 8, 2023

SUPPORT

Dear Chair Peña-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

My name is JD Robinson. I am the Program Coordinator for SNAP of Maryland Hunger Solutions, a statewide, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to end hunger in Maryland by improving participation in the federal nutrition programs. Maryland Hunger Solutions strongly supports House Bill 1144, which would require state departments, agencies and programs to designate a language access compliance coordinator, establish a language access policy and plan and take other actions to ensure reasonable access to the entity's programs and activities for individuals with limited English proficiency. It also requires the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights to provide oversight, monitoring, investigation and enforcement of certain language access provisions.

For over ten years, MD Hunger Solutions has provided application assistance to any Marylander trying to apply for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP. We provide this service both in-person and over-the-phone, where our toll-free hotline receives 400-500 calls per month from Marylanders seeking assistance. Of these calls, approximately 20-25% of them come from households with limited English proficiency (LEP) who request translation services.

Most of these LEP families have notified our staff of barriers they have faced regarding language access and receiving these critical benefits. Some of these barriers include, but are not limited to:

- Receiving correspondence (email, text, mail, etc.) in their non-preferred language
- Long wait times on DHS Call Center and local DSS office phone lines when asking for translation services, often longer than their non-translated counterparts
- Being turned away from local DSS offices by security guards or staff due to lack of staff being able to provide language access
- No translation services provided during SNAP interviews, a required process for approval



Maryland Hunger Solutions

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When these barriers occur, they can do substantial harm to the family or individual attempting to receive SNAP. The most common are delays in processing for applications or renewal forms, while the most harmful are denials for services. Often these barriers are compounded as families do everything they can to establish services. For example, they may receive a notice requiring action to renew their benefits, but it arrives in their non-preferred language. To amend this, they attempt to contact the call center to gain understanding, but are on hold for hours as they wait for a translator. If this fails, they try going to a local office, but are turned away because they do not speak English and no translators are available.

Designating a compliance coordinator and creating a robust language access plan for each agency and the state is the first step in ensuring these barriers are removed. Effective communication between DHS and the families it serves is paramount, and language access services that can help facilitate that communication ensures a much smoother process. The next step is promoting compliance with state and federal language access laws so that language is not a barrier to accessing services like SNAP.

HB 1144 recognizes the critical role the provision of language services plays in ensuring that individuals with limited English proficiency are afforded equal and meaningful access to government programs and activities.

In conclusion, we urge a favorable report for HB 1144. Thank you for your time.