

House Bill 981 **Individuals With Limited English Proficiency - Access to Public Services**

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

March 28th 2024

Support

Catholic Charities of Baltimore supports HB 981, which would require the Department of Disabilities to fully implement certain provisions of law requiring equal access to public services for individuals with limited English proficiency.

For a century, Catholic Charities has provided care and services to improve the lives of Marylanders in need. We accompany Marylanders as they age with dignity, support their pursuit of employment and career advancement, heal from trauma and addiction, achieve economic independence, prepare for educational success, and welcome immigrant neighbors into Maryland communities.

As a leading provider of human services in Maryland, our extensive experience assisting Limited English Proficiency (LEP) individuals and families underscores the significant barriers created by the lack of language access to essential services. For example, in our efforts to help clients secure emergency shelter, we've encountered situations where calls are abruptly disconnected upon realizing the client's inability to communicate in English with state or local agencies. Moreover, we've observed inconsistencies in interpretation services within various programs resulting in inaccurate or incomplete information exchange and subsequent confusion. Recently, a troubling incident occurred where several clients were initially placed in a shelter, only to be denied access the next day due to language barriers—the shelter lacked bilingual staff and failed to utilize the language line, while the clients did not speak English. This led to confusion and frustration among the clients, highlighting the critical need for effective communication in such situations.

In Maryland, equal access to public services is not just a moral imperative but also a legal right established by federal civil rights law and the state's 2002 Language Access Law.^{1,2} For LEP individuals navigating complex systems, understanding basic paperwork can determine whether critical needs are met. As Maryland's LEP population continues to grow, the passage of HB 981 represents a crucial stride towards equity and inclusion.

For these reasons, Catholic Charities of Baltimore urges the committee to issue a favorable report for HB 981.

Submitted By: Madelin Martinez, Assistant Director of Advocacy.

1. Office of Equal Opportunity - LEP Program Overview - MDOT SHA . roads.maryland.gov. Accessed November 2, 2023. <https://roads.maryland.gov/mdotsha/pages/Index.aspx?PageId=445>

2. Hofstetter J, Mchugh M, O'toole A. A Framework for Language Access Key Features of U.S. State and Local Language Access Laws and Policies.; 2021. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/language-access-2021_final.pdf