

March 8, 2024

Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Klausmeier, and distinguished members of the Finance Committee,

NAMI Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a network of more than 58,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations, and service providers. NAMI Maryland is a 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to providing education, support, and advocacy for people living with mental illnesses, their families, and the wider community.

NAMI MD believes it is absolutely essential for culture, identity, and language to be a part of the conversation as we discuss both mental health and mental health care. Language barriers can make communicating with providers difficult, or even impossible, particularly when a person is seeking counseling for sensitive or uniquely personal issues. These topics can be difficult for anyone to put into words, but it is especially difficult for those who may not speak the same language as a potential provider.

Even when a person does speak English, it can be challenging for them to convey their feelings and experiences in English. Additionally, it can be frustrating when they don't understand the true meaning of what a provider is trying to say.

Culturally competent language assistance services are important when delivering and receiving mental care. A provider who understands a patient's culture and needs will know culturally specific information. For example, someone might describe what they are feeling with a phrase like "*Me duele el corazón.*" While this literally means "my heart hurts," it is an expression of emotional distress — not a sign of chest pain. A culturally sensitive doctor would be aware of this interpretation and would ask for more information instead of assuming the problem is purely physical.

Language barriers and limited availability of culturally appropriate mental health service providers may prevent people from getting the care that they need. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report.