

Senate Bill 991
Behavioral Health - Language Assistance Services Pilot Program
Finance Committee
March 8, 2024
Support

Catholic Charities of Baltimore supports SB 991, which establishes the Language Assistance Services Pilot Program within the Behavioral Health Administration, providing grants to local behavioral health authorities to reimburse providers for language assistance services for children with limited English proficiency accessing behavioral health services and for parents/guardians coordinating such services.

For over a century, Catholic Charities has been dedicated to improving the lives of Marylanders in need through a vast spectrum of care and services, including housing and shelter, health care, education, immigration, workforce training, senior services and more. **As the second-largest provider of behavioral health services in the state, we offer counseling services to children in more than 100 schools in four counties.** Additionally, we offer behavioral health and case management services to children and adults in eight outpatient clinics, along with providing residential treatment and education to youth in need at our campus in Timonium.

Building upon our longstanding dedication to improving the lives of Marylanders, our Villa Maria Behavioral Health program prioritizes accessibility and inclusivity by utilizing language lines at our expense and actively recruiting bilingual providers. At present, we have 3 therapists and 2 psychiatrists who are bilingual Spanish speakers, alongside one bilingual office staff member in our Millersville clinic. Despite our efforts to expand services to those with limited English proficiency, securing sustainable funding beyond Medicaid and grants has been difficult, putting a strain on our resources. Our capacity remains limited, highlighting the critical need for support such as the proposed grants under SB 991.

Considering our efforts at Villa Maria Behavioral Health, it's essential to recognize the broader challenges faced by immigrant families in accessing behavioral health care due to language barriers. The report "Speaking the Language" published by the Public Justice Center and Centro SOL at Johns Hopkins University found that federal law requires healthcare providers receiving federal funds to offer competent interpretation and translation services to patients with limited English proficiency at no cost.¹ However, behavioral health providers in Maryland report lacking the resources and guidance to consistently provide these legally mandated language assistance services.¹ The report highlights troubling cases where children were outright denied behavioral health treatment simply because they or their parents had limited English skills.¹ Failing to bridge this language gap puts already vulnerable young people at further risk, jeopardizing their health, development, and education outcomes.

SB 991 takes an important step towards ensuring language access for this population by establishing the Language Assistance Services Pilot Program. Providing grants to local behavioral health authorities to reimburse providers for interpretation and translation will help remove a major financial barrier that currently prevents many from offering these services. The bill appropriately targets children's behavioral health services, an area of acute need where communication is vital for proper diagnosis, treatment adherence, and family engagement. By investing in language assistance capacity, this pilot program can help behavioral health providers meet their legal obligations while improving the quality of care for children with limited English proficiency and their families. It represents a worthy effort by the state to uphold civil rights and address unmet behavioral health needs in immigrant communities. **For these reasons, Catholic Charities urges the committee to issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 991.**

Submitted By: Madelin Martinez, Assistant Director of Advocacy

1. The Public Justice Center and Centro SOL, Johns Hopkins University. New report: Maryland mental health providers' failure to provide interpretation and translation services denies care to children and adolescents with limited English proficiency. Centro SOL. Published December 7, 2022. Accessed March 7, 2024. <https://jhcentrosol.org/health-policy/report-speaking-the-language/>