



Kennedy Krieger Institute

**DATE:** March 8, 2024  
**BILL NO:** Senate Bill 991  
**BILL TITLE:** Behavioral Health - Language Assistance Services Pilot Program  
**POSITION:** Support

**COMMITTEE:** Senate Finance

**Kennedy Krieger Institute supports Senate Bill 991 - Behavioral Health - Language Assistance Services Pilot Program.**

**Bill Summary:**

Senate Bill 991 would establish the Language Assistance Services Pilot Program in the Behavioral Health Administration. This program would provide grants to local behavioral health authorities to reimburse behavioral health providers for language assistance services for children with limited English proficiency.

**Background:**

Kennedy Krieger Institute is dedicated to improving the lives of children and young adults with developmental, behavioral, cognitive, and physical challenges. Kennedy Krieger's services include inpatient, outpatient, school-based, and community-based programs. Over 27,000 individuals receive services annually at Kennedy Krieger.

The vision for the Office for Health Equity Inclusion and Diversity (O-HEID) at Kennedy Krieger Institute is to promote the health and well-being of those who work and receive training and services at Kennedy Krieger Institute. The O-HEID uses evidence, culturally relevant, and equity-based approaches that assures diversity and inclusion. The O-HEID is working to establish collaboration, data, and metrics to address remediable disparities within our patient populations, policies, and practices.

**Rationale:**

In 2023, the Maryland State Department of Education reported that English-language learners made up a significant portion of the school population, representing about 1 in 8 children and a total of over 105,000 students.<sup>1,2</sup> In the past fiscal year, Kennedy Krieger has provided more than 20,000 appointments for individuals who required the use of an interpreter. While most of these families reported speaking Spanish as their primary language (over 70%), the Institute had more than 40 unique languages represented across our patient population.

Nationwide, 1 out of 5 children has a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder, although only about 20 percent of these children receive the mental health services they need.<sup>3,4</sup> Additionally, there is an ongoing shortage of pediatric behavioral health clinicians, particularly those who can provide services in languages other than English.<sup>5</sup> Serious consequences can result when families are not provided with access to medically trained interpreters, including negative impacts on patients' satisfaction, quality of care, and health outcomes.<sup>6,7</sup> However, there is growing concern amongst the community that while there is an increase in the volume of patients with limited English proficiency (LEP), there are multiple reports of children being refused mental health services based on speaking a language other than English.<sup>8</sup> This represents a critical inequity for children in Maryland.

In 2022, the Public Justice Center in conjunction with Centro SOL at Johns Hopkins University conducted a listening session with approximately 25 Maryland behavioral/mental health providers and organizations to identify the struggles they are facing with providing Maryland youth with interpretation and translation services.<sup>8</sup> Many barriers were noted including a lack of guidance and funding for interpretation services. Suggested solutions included an increase in financial resources, training, and community partnerships, as well as clarity on available resources to build and maintain capacity to provide routine access to language services.

We strongly support the creation of the Language Assistance Services Pilot Program which would increase access to behavioral and mental health services for children and families with limited English proficiency by requiring

providers to 1) conduct self-assessments of the needs of this population and 2) develop written language access plans to meet these needs. As such, we are in full support of SB 991, as these efforts are critical for greater equity in behavioral and mental health service provision for Maryland children.

### **Kennedy Krieger Institute requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 991.**

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#### **References**

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3. National Research Council (US) and Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on the Prevention of Mental Disorders and Substance Abuse Among Children, Youth, and Young Adults: Research Advances and Promising Interventions. *Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders among Young People: Progress and Possibilities*. (O'Connell ME, Boat T, Warner KE, eds.). National Academies Press (US); 2009. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK32775/>
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