

Senate Bill 991 Behavioral Health – Language Assistance Services Pilot Program

Senate Finance Committee

March 8, 2024

Position: SUPPORT

Mental Health Association of Maryland (MHAMD) is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as behavioral health). We appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of SB 991.

SB 991 would establish a Language Assistance Services Pilot Program, to provide grants to select Local Behavioral Health Authorities to reimburse behavioral health providers for language assistance services for children with limited English proficiency and their families.

The Public Justice Center and Centro SOL studied the issue of interpretation services for behavioral health care in Maryland for children with limited English proficiency and their families and concluded that needed translation services were in short supply.¹

Providers sometimes refuse to serve children with limited English proficiency, or children are placed on lengthy waiting lists. Family members, who are untrained and can be biased, may be relied on to provide translation services. Or, in cases where a child or youth speaks English more fluently than their parents, they are used to translate for their parents. This is rife with potential pitfalls.

The Public Justice Center and Centro SOL report states that there are legal requirements for providers to offer interpretation services, since both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Affordable Care Act of 2010 forbid discrimination against people from different nations of origin, and most people with limited English proficiency are immigrants.

Mental health providers in Maryland have reported multiple challenges to offering translation and interpretation services, including a large volume of patients with limited English proficiency and lack of funding.

To a limited extent, SB 991 will address the funding issue. By establishing a modest amount of grant funding in select jurisdictions to reimburse mental health providers, and requiring

¹ The Public Justice Center and Centro LOL. The Right to Interpretation and Translation Services for Children and Adolescents with Mental Health Needs in Maryland. November 2022. Accessed March 6, 2024.
<https://www.publicjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Speaking-the-Language-Report.pdf>

extensive data collection, SB 991 will help many children and families and at the same time allow Maryland to assess the extent of the problem and the cost to address it.

For these reasons MHAMD supports SB 991 and urges a favorable report.