

Testimony to the House Health and Government Operations Committee
IN SUPPORT of HB 0987 - State Government
Equal Access to Public Services for Individuals with Limited English Proficiency
By Jimara Kocik for the Autism Society of Maryland
March 5, 2024

Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee, my name is Jimara Kocik. I am a community advocate residing in Howard County, a Board Member of Autism Society of Maryland, and mom of three children, one of them with Autism.

I am here today to ask for your support of HB0987 which would provide Equal Access to Public Services for Individuals with Limited English Proficiency. While not on the schedule today, I also ask for your support of a companion bill, HB0981.

I personally have had a difficult experience navigating a very complex process to understand the special education services available from the State of Maryland since my son was diagnosed with autism years ago.

Every family in our state must have the same access to care and high quality services for their children with disabilities, regardless of the language they speak. The barrier of languages leaves many families without much needed services and support. Our state government must figure out how to assist families with no knowledge of English, especially for those who have a child with a disability.

The only hope for a lot of us who are alone in a country where no one seems to be in a hurry to help us or our children, is when a non profit organization steps in to support and guide us on this journey. That is why I am a volunteer and board member of the Autism Society of Maryland. and I have learned how to advocate for myself and now assist others who have a child with special needs while, at the same time, learning a new language.

I have been learning English since I arrived in the United States years ago but English is a very complex language and I have months and years ahead of me to master new skills and fluency.

Should that mean that my son should not get the full array of services for which he is entitled until I learn English well enough? Do you think it is fair for children born in the United States to be denied services because the family cannot communicate adequately in English to advocate for them? What happens if, in the end, they never master the language? Does that mean their children or young adults should be denied the services available to English speakers?

Maryland has a big population of families who are non-English speaking and have children and young adults in need of services right now; however they cannot access the information, forms, resources, and guidance in our state. Maybe a form is in Spanish but not the instruction. Or they

call with questions about the Autism Waiver and there is nobody in that office that speaks Spanish. Their rights have been violated.

EVERY child in Maryland should receive equitable services that are high quality and delivered on time. And EVERY family should have easy access to those services through the State of Maryland. Please help us ensure that 100% of our families and children with disabilities have access to the resources and staff to help them navigate those services in their own language.

I urge you to **support Bill HB0987 and Bill HB0981.**

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