



**Maryland Developmental
Disabilities Council**

CREATING CHANGE • IMPROVING LIVES

House Ways and Means Committee

HB 563: Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance

February 13, 2024

Position: Support with Amendments

The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council (Council) is an independent, public policy organization that creates change to make it possible for people with developmental disabilities to live the lives they want with the support they need. Our vision is that people with and without disabilities in Maryland live, learn, work, and play together.

The Council supports HB 563 with the following amendments to ensure language-related assistance includes signed languages:

- Adding “AND VIDEOPHONE” after each reference to telephone on page 1, line 8; page 3, line 21; and page 4, line 5 and line 9
- Adding to page 2, line 9 “INCLUDING SIGNED LANGUAGES” after “ENGLISH”
- Adding to page 3, line 25 “OR UNWRITTEN” after “ORAL”

WHAT does this legislation do?

- This bill establishes the process for how the State Board of Elections will determine when there is a need for a local board of elections to create language-related assistance for a language other than English. The need will be determined using data from the U.S. Census Bureau or comparable data collected by a public office.
- If a local board needs to provide language-related assistance, it must provide all written materials in the designated language (i.e., registration and voting notices, election forms and instructions, signs at early voting centers, signs at regular voting centers, and ballots). In addition, signs at early voting and regular voting centers must include information about a telephone interpreter line they can use to help them answer questions to poll workers.

WHY is this legislation important?

- The lack of accessible polling locations in Maryland remains a barrier for people with disabilities. **People with disabilities who are also speak Spanish reported the highest rates of voting difficulties in 2020 and 2022¹** compared to people without disabilities and people with disabilities that spoke English.
- Voting is a fundamental right that Maryland’s citizens with developmental disabilities want and need to access. Researchers have found that with more accessible voting options available in the 2020 election, 62% of people with disabilities voted (a six-point increase over 2016)². Additional methods to increase accessibility, such as language assistance, may allow even more people with disabilities to vote.

This bill is another critical step to ensure all Marylanders have the access and opportunity to exercise their fundamental right to vote. For these reasons, the Council supports HB 563 with amendments.

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¹ https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-07/EAC_2023_Rutgers_Report_FINAL.pdf

² https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/Program_Disability_Research/FactSheet_Disability_Voter_Turnout_2020.pdf