



Testimony in Support of House Bill 563: An Act Concerning Language Assistance for Voters

February 13, 2024

Good afternoon, Honorable Chair Vanessa E. Atterbeary, Vice Chair Jheanelle K. Wilkins, and Esteemed Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Isabelle C. Muhlbauer, and I am the Voting Rights Advocacy Manager at LatinoJustice PRLDEF. LatinoJustice PRLDEF uses and challenges laws to create a more just and equitable society. We transform harmful systems, empower our communities, fight for racial justice, and grow the next generation of líderes. I am here to testify in strong support of House Bill 563, a landmark legislation designed to strengthen democracy in Maryland by ensuring all voters, regardless of English proficiency, have equitable access to the ballot box.

LatinoJustice has a long history of advocating for the expansion of language access rights to ensure the Latinx community, and all language minorities, has equal access to the ballot box. We enthusiastically support HB 563 as it extends language access beyond what is required by the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA). Under the VRA, only two counties in Maryland are required to have language assistance for Limited English Proficient (LEP) voters, but according to the most recent census data, more than 425,000 Maryland residents statewide have limited English proficiency. We can and should do more to improve language access for our communities and make voting easier for minority populations speaking other languages. Language barriers must not continue to be an impediment to LEP communities that seek to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

H.B. 563 expands language access by lowering the population threshold requirements for municipalities to provide language translation. This bill mandates a comprehensive range of language assistance services, including the provision of translated registration and voting notices, election-related



forms, instructions, signage at voting centers, and ballots. Importantly, it requires quality translations that maintain the integrity and intent of the original content without undue reliance on automated translation services. Additionally, H.B. 563 introduces innovative measures by mandating the availability of bilingual election judges and sets up a language hotline service in selected languages, thereby significantly improving in-person assistance and support to LEP voters.

Uninhibited access to the ballot is at the core of a representative democracy. As such, we must continue to ensure that all voters, including historically marginalized communities, are able to freely have their voices heard through their vote. LatinoJustice calls on the Maryland legislature to pass H.B. 563 to strengthen language access in voting and fortify state-level voting rights protections for LEP voters.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Isabelle C. Muhlbauer
Voting Rights Advocacy Manager