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Ways and Means Committee

Subcommittees

Early Childhood

Local Revenues



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of House Bill 563: Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language- Related Assistance
February 13, 2024

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and esteemed members of the Ways and Means Committee, it is my pleasure to come before you today and offer testimony in favor of **House Bill 563: Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language- Related Assistance**.

The 2020 census confirmed that Maryland is the most diverse state on the east coast, and the third most diverse state in America, with 136 languages and dialects spoken within our borders and growing Asian and Latino populations. One in every five Marylanders speak a language other than English at home. With the abundance of diversity in Maryland, it is crucial that we create inclusive elections so that every citizen is able to exercise their right to vote.

Currently, the federal language assistance threshold is triggered when 5% or 10,000 citizens of voting age in a county speak a language other than English. With the current threshold, only Montgomery and Prince George's County are required to translate election materials to Spanish even though we know translation is needed throughout the state.

HB 563 will lower Maryland's language access threshold, triggering it when at least 2% (but in no instance fewer than 100 individuals) or 4,000 citizens within voting age in a county speak a language other than English. All election materials would then be translated to each language that meets the threshold in each county, expanding access to voting material for citizens. Most, if not all, counties would be required to provide Spanish translations. While Montgomery County may be required to translate to French, Cantonese, Korean and Amharic.

To ensure the accuracy of translations, HB 563 would require the State Board of Elections to establish a process that allows for public input and review when determining covered languages and review of translated election materials before dissemination.

This bill would also require local boards of elections to post signage at all vote centers and precinct polling locations during early voting and on Election day, in languages that meet the threshold in that county. The signs will be posted in visible locations to notify voters that language assistance and interpreters are available.

This bill would also create a telephone hotline that provides nonpartisan support from an interpreter from the start of the early voting period to Election Day. Voters with limited English proficiency would be able to call in and receive assistance in any language that meets the 2% threshold.

Several states have established more inclusive criteria to more broadly provide multilingual materials, including New York, Connecticut, Colorado, and California. HB 563 brings Maryland in line with the criteria tested in New York and Connecticut.

Expanding access to language assistance is only beneficial if people are aware of the resources that are available to them, so signage detailing the translation services in the languages that meet the threshold would be required at all voting centers and polling locations.

Voting is one of the most fundamental ways for citizens to engage, and we must do all that we can to ensure everyone is empowered to vote. I respectfully urge a favorable vote on **House Bill 563**.

Bernice Mireku-Booth