

February 13, 2024

Testimony on HB 563
Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance
Ways & Means Committee

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports HB 563 which would expand the language translation requirements for elections and provide additional support for voters whose first language is not English.

Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act requires that counties provide election materials to specific language minorities groups that meet the populations threshold. The language minority groups in a specific county must be more than 10,000 citizens of voting age or 5% voting age population. As of now, only Montgomery and Prince George's County are required to translate to Spanish. HB 563 proposes lowering this threshold and establishes processes to ensure the accuracy of translations as well as assistance that goes beyond the translation of election related materials.

Lowers the threshold for required translations

HB 563 would change the language threshold to 2% or 4,000 of the citizens voting age population - creating more inclusive elections that ensure all citizens are able to vote, regardless of English proficiency. The State Board of Elections (SBE) would determine the languages to be translated in each county and notify the local boards of elections. Once notified, the local boards are to translate all election-related materials meeting the language assistance threshold for their county.

Allows for public review of translated materials

HB 563 would ensure the accuracy of translated materials. SBE would be required to establish a process that allows for public input and stakeholder engagement when determining covered languages and review of translated election materials before dissemination.

Establishes a telephone interpreter hotline

Even with translated materials, voters should have the option to request support from a trained nonpartisan interpreter. HB 563 would require that the SBE establish a telephone interpreter hotline. The hotline is to be made available from at least the start of the early voting period through Election Day. Hotline interpreters are to provide translations in all languages meeting the established threshold throughout the state. SBE is to ensure the security and integrity of the hotline.

Requires signage at polling places

Maryland voters are only able to take advantage of translation services if they are aware. Hb 563 would requires that local boards of elections 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 are to be posted in visible locations to notify voters that language assistance and interpreters are available.

Several states throughout the country have taken similar actions to create more inclusive elections. New York and Connecticut have changed their translation threshold to 2% or 4,000 citizens of voting age. Colorado is at 2.5% or 2,000 citizens of voting age and California is at 3% but working towards the translation threshold proposed in this legislation. Other states that have expanded their programs to include public review, telephone interpretations while also changing their translation thresholds include Florida, Washington DC, Oregon and more.

Maryland voters only benefit if the options for voting and overall process are in a language they can understand. We should do all that we can to ensure our elections are truly accessible to all eligible voters.

We urge a favorable report on HB 563.

