



**Maryland House of Delegates
Ways & Means Committee
February 13, 2024
Submitted February 9, 2024**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 563, regarding language-related assistance. Fair Elections Center is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to removing barriers to registration and voting through advocacy and impact litigation.

Democracy benefits when jurisdictions commit to and invest in holding elections in which all their citizens can participate, regardless of their ability to read or speak English. Providing high quality language assistance in elections has been positively associated with both increasing voter participation by Latino, Asian American, American Indian, and Alaska Native citizens, as well as helping to increase the presence of elected representatives from language-minority communities. The Voting Rights Act establishes minimum requirements for language assistance and access. In expanding language access beyond these minimums, Maryland would join other states and localities in increasing access to the ballot for even more limited-English-proficient (LEP) voters.

Widening the tent to cover more language-minority communities: HB 563 would lower the translation threshold for election materials from 5% to 2% (with at least 100 individuals) of the voting age population in a county or less than 2% but with at least 4,000 individuals. In counties where this threshold is met, voting materials of all types will be created in the designated languages: registration and voting notices, forms and instructions, interpreter signage at all polling places, and ballots. When available, a bilingual election judge would also be present. By expanding the definition of what it means to have a “significant and substantial need for language-related assistance,” Maryland will ensure that even fewer voters get left behind simply because of the language they speak most comfortably.

Additionally, HB 563 will correct for a gap in the federal language assistance coverage formula by not limiting its coverage to only the few language-minority groups identified in the Voting Rights Act coverage formula (American Indian, Asian American, Alaskan Natives, or of Spanish heritage). Examples of such languages that are not reached by federal law regardless of the numbers of speakers in a jurisdiction include Amharic, Arabic, and Haitian Creole. Extending assistance to any language-minority group that satisfies the proposed threshold would maximize access to Maryland elections by increasing accessibility for all citizens regardless of where they came from or the language in which they are most comfortable.

Improving existing access through the creation of an Interpreter Hotline: HB 563 also provides for the creation of a telephone Interpreter Hotline to serve voters during the early voting period and on each election day, with interpreters equipped to help with all designated languages. This practice particularly would increase the ability of voters who do not have a preferred, available, trusted assistant to accompany them to the polls.

HB 563 would increase access to the ballot box for LEP voters by closing gaps in previous coverage and increasing access to competent interpreters. By increasing parity and deepening relationships between public officials, the communities they represent, and the voters who elect them, effective language assistance efforts increase faith and trust in government and make democracy more responsive to all community members. Fair Elections Center urges swift passage of this bill. If you would like further information, please feel free to contact Michelle Kanter Cohen, Policy Director and Senior Counsel at Fair Elections Center, at mkantercohen@fairelectionscenter.org.