



SB 851: Public Schools - Individuals With Disabilities –

Main Entrance Accessibility and Emergency Planning

Testimony of the Maryland Independent Living Network

SUPPORT – Favorable

Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee, March 5, 2025

The Maryland Independent Living Network is a coalition of the Maryland Statewide Independent Living Council and the seven Maryland-based Centers for Independent Living (CIL). CILs are created by federal law. CILs work to enhance the civil rights and quality of services for people with disabilities. There are seven CILs located throughout Maryland, operated by and for people with disabilities. CILs provide Information and Referral, Advocacy, Peer Support, Independent Living Skills training, and Transition Services to individuals with disabilities in their communities.

SB 851 requires each county board of education, by September 1, 2025, and each September 1 thereafter, to publish on its website and report to the General Assembly on the number of main entrances to public school buildings in the county that are not accessible for individuals with disabilities and not in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Additionally, SB 851 requires each local school system to send a copy of the local school system's emergency plan to the State Department of Education.

SB 851 is a crucial piece of legislation that will significantly improve the safety and accessibility of our public schools for students, staff, and visitors with disabilities. Main entrance accessibility and emergency planning are essential for ensuring an inclusive and safe learning environment for everyone.

Regarding Main Entrance Accessibility

Currently, there is a lack of readily available information regarding the accessibility of main entrances in our public schools. This lack of transparency makes it difficult for families of children with disabilities to assess the suitability of a school for their child. Requiring county boards of education to publish and report on the number of non-compliant main entrances will:

- **Increase Transparency:** Families will have access to crucial information, allowing them to make informed decisions about their child's education.
- **Promote Accountability:** Publicly reporting these numbers will hold school systems accountable for ensuring accessibility and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- **Drive Progress:** By highlighting areas of non-compliance, this legislation will incentivize school systems to prioritize accessibility improvements.

Regarding Emergency Planning:

Effective emergency planning is paramount for the safety of all students and staff, especially those with disabilities. SB 851 strengthens current emergency planning procedures by:

- **Ensuring Plan Submission:** Requiring local school systems to submit their emergency plans to the State Department of Education will facilitate oversight and ensure consistency with state guidelines.
- **Enabling Analysis and Reporting:** The Department's analysis and subsequent report to the General Assembly will provide valuable insights into the preparedness of our schools and identify areas for improvement. This data-driven approach will allow for more effective resource allocation and policy adjustments.
- **Focusing on Individual Needs:** The bill reinforces the importance of individualized accommodations for students with IEPs and 504 plans during emergencies, ensuring that their specific needs are addressed.

Every student deserves access to a safe and inclusive learning environment. SB 851 takes significant steps towards achieving this goal by promoting transparency, strengthening emergency preparedness, and prioritizing the needs of individuals with disabilities.

The Maryland Independent Living Network strongly **supports** SB 851 and requests a favorable report.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

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