

**EDUCATION, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE**

**February 26, 2025**

**Senate Bill 685**

**Election Law – Local Boards of Elections – Language-Related Assistance**

**POSITION: SUPPORT**

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is Maryland’s designated protection and advocacy organization, dedicated to advancing the rights of Marylanders with disabilities. DRM works to increase opportunities for Marylanders with disabilities to be part of their communities through voting by advocating for equal access to the ballot box.

DRM supports Senate Bill 685, which would require the State Board of Elections (SBE) to determine whether there is a need to offer assistance for voters in certain languages during an election. Local boards of election are then required to provide certain language assistance and materials, as well as make efforts to recruit election judges with language fluency, and generally increasing access to language-related support by voters. This bill targets support to people with limited English proficiency, who may need greater access to materials in a language other than English. Local boards will be held accountable by SBE, who will make its determinations on language-related access needs publicly available via the web.

Language-related access is a disability rights issue, as people with disabilities communicate in various languages and with different levels of fluency. For Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, access to multiple sign languages—not just American Sign Language—is essential for full participation in democratic processes. SB 685 recognizes this need by specifically referencing “a language that is oral or unwritten” (line 29). By passing this bill, election law would provide stronger resources for Deaf and Hard of Hearing voters. Additionally, the bill’s language allows for broader support for individuals who may have difficulties processing written information, thereby increasing access.

SB 685 recognizes the barriers faced by many Marylanders whose primary language is not spoken or written American English and strengthens voting

processes for people with disabilities by including considerations for languages that are not only spoken. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on SB 685. Please do not hesitate to contact me at [GillianJ@DisabilityRightsMD.org](mailto:GillianJ@DisabilityRightsMD.org) or by phone at 443-692-2498.

Respectfully Submitted,

Gillian Justice  
Community Engagement Coordinator  
Disability Rights Maryland