

**Azeb Adere, Ethiopian and Eritrean Special Needs Community**

House Health and Government Operations Committee

**HB 1473: State Government - Equal Access to Public Services for Individuals With Limited English Proficiency and Individuals With Disabilities**

March 11, 2025

Position: Support

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**My name is Azeb Adere, and I am the President of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Special Needs Community (EESNC). We serve over 700 people with disabilities and their caregivers across Maryland, many of whom speak Amharic as their native language.**

**Today, I am sharing the story of Aster, a mom that I have helped through EESNC. I have helped Aster translate her story into English because she speaks Amharic.**

Aster is a mother of a 20-year-old son who has cerebral palsy and requires 24/7 care. Her son needs help to eat, wash, sleep, and go out. As a mother, she wants the best for him, but there have been many barriers she has had to face—most of them because of language. It has been incredibly difficult for her to navigate the system and access the services her son needs, and that's why I am here today to speak about the importance of passing this Language Access Bill, HB 1473.

When Aster first applied for Maryland Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) services for her son, she had no idea about the complexities of the system. She doesn't speak English well, and because of that, her son was denied services. She couldn't understand the questions they were asking her during the assessment. They kept sending her emails and letters in English, which she didn't fully understand. The result of this lack of communication was that her son was placed at a mildly affected level, a level 2, on the HRST scale (a system that rates the level of care needed, with 6 being the most severe). She had no idea what that meant or how it would impact her son's care until she reached out to EESNC, where she is a member.

EESNC explained to her that her son's level of care should not have been assessed as a 2, especially considering his condition and the amount of care he needs. We helped her understand what the HRST level meant and guided her through the process of advocating for a higher level of care for her son. With our support, she made several calls and sent multiple emails to the DDA, but it still wasn't easy. Eventually, her son's care level was raised to a 4, but it still isn't enough to meet his needs, and she needs to continue advocating for a higher level of service.

The most frustrating part of all of this was that the language barrier was the root cause of the problems she faced. She wasn't able to communicate properly with DDA and the Coordinator of Community Services (CCS), and they didn't have an interpreter available

to help her when she called. Every time she received an email or letter in English, she had to contact EESNC for assistance in understanding it. This was so overwhelming and caused her so much stress and anxiety. She couldn't even write letters to DDA on her own because she didn't have the language skills to express herself properly. This isn't just her problem—it's a problem many other families like hers face every day.

Without proper language access, her son's case was mishandled, and she couldn't properly advocate for his needs. The system isn't designed for people like her, and it's clear that something needs to change. The Language Access Bill would make a huge difference for families like hers. It would help ensure that all families, regardless of the language they speak, have the ability to understand the services available to them, advocate for their children, and communicate effectively with agencies like DDA. It would ease the stress and anxiety that families face when trying to navigate a system that is already so difficult.

I truly believe that if the Language Access Bill passes, it will bring about the change needed to help families like Aster's get the support they deserve. They shouldn't have to rely on others to help them understand the very services that are supposed to help their children. The language barrier should not be an obstacle to providing the best care for our loved ones.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue and for your consideration of the impact the Language Access Bill would have on families across the state.