



**HB 1473**

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

In the House Health and Government Operations Committee

Hearing on March 11, 2025

**Position: FAVORABLE**

*Maryland Legal Aid (MLA) submits its written and oral testimony on HB1473 at the request of Delegate Acevero.*

**MLA asks that the Committee report favorably on HB 1473.**

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires all U.S. states and territories that receive federal funds to take reasonable steps to ensure meaningful language access to governmental programs and activities.<sup>1</sup> The Maryland General Assembly has declared that the inability to speak, understand, and/or read the English language is a barrier that prevents access to public services, and that governmental services are essential to the welfare of Maryland residents.<sup>2</sup> Current Maryland law requires state agencies to provide equal access to public services for individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP). Maryland’s existing language access laws, however, lack specific and orderly administration of this policy.

HB 1473 places investigation and enforcement authority in the Governor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs and updates the existing language access law to include LEP users as well as hearing and vision impaired residents to gain equal access. State agencies must develop and update a language access plan and evaluate their services. HB 1473 is a reasonable bill that establishes organization and compliance with existing federal and state law.

Language accuracy is extraordinarily important. A person’s complete understanding of legal documents and terms, accurate explanation and understanding of medical symptoms, and/or

---

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Justice has issued a general guidance document, which sets forth the compliance standards recipients must follow to ensure that programs and activities they normally provide in English are accessible to LEP persons and thus do not discriminate on the basis of national origin in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended [42 U.S.C.A. § 2000d et seq.], and its implementing regulations. Recipients must take reasonable steps to ensure meaningful access to their programs and activities by LEP persons.  
<https://www.ojp.gov/program/civil-rights/limited-english-proficient-lep>.

<sup>2</sup> The State of Maryland has a language access law and a definitive equal access policy. State Government §10-1101 et. seq.

recitations of public health matters all require proper translation. It is well documented that poor language accuracy in communications can have devastating results.<sup>3</sup>

MLA is a non-profit law firm that provides free legal services to the State's low-income and vulnerable residents. Our 12 offices serve residents in each of Maryland's 24 jurisdictions and handle a range of civil legal matters, including housing, family law, benefits, bankruptcy, debt collection matters, and criminal record expungements. Like other Marylanders, our clients apply for jobs, benefits and insurance for themselves and their children, report criminal conduct, try to comply with court orders, and intersect with all of our state agencies. They experience discrimination by state officials who fail to comply with existing law that requires equal language access. The current law is a good start, but it needs updating and a compliance structure.

Language access policies exist but generally are not followed by state employees. Within the past few years, MLA has provided legal assistance to thousands of clients whose primary language is not English. Over 65% of those clients interacted with a State agency, department, or program. They are impeded while applying for and complying with governmental programs such as unemployment, Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA), or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), simply because they are unable to communicate with people who work for the agencies, and/or are unable to read agency vital documents and decisions. Most agency documents are only available in English, and when an agency provides translated documents, it does not include everything the client is expected to understand. When asking for an interpreter, some clients never get a response; others get contacted in English without an interpreter option. Maryland government programs lack a consistent method that would allow LEP individuals to effectively communicate their needs. MLA's non-English-speaking clients consistently report that state employees make them feel like burdens for not understanding or speaking English well.

Clients frequently report inability to access the Department of Social Services (DSS) and to understand the documents required by the Unemployment Administration. If a parent asks for translated documents from DSS, they are not available on appeal. The Office of Administrative

---

<sup>3</sup><https://www.theverge.com/2021/3/9/22319225/google-translate-medical-instructions-unreliable>; [https://herd.io/en-us/blogs/performance-marketing/human-vs-machine-translation-benefits#:~:text=Cultural%20context%3A%20Google%20Translate%20may,in%20the%20way%20that's%20expected](https://herd.io/en-us/blogs/performance-marketing/human-vs-machine-translation-benefits#:~:text=Cultural%20context%3A%20Google%20Translate%20may,in%20the%20way%20that's%20expected;);

Hearings only translates certain documents and materials.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, MLA represented a child who was physically and sexually abused by a noncustodial parent. The custodial parent is not a native English speaker. The family court issued a complex order intending to protect that child. But that order was in English. The custodial parent was offered a one-time oral translation of the court order—whose complex terms the court expected her to follow day and night for the conceivable future. The child remained at risk because the custodial parent was forced to try to remember what she was told was contained in the order. Other clients call us because they cannot understand written correspondence from agencies: they request correspondence in Spanish or other languages, but documents are sent in English. For decades, our LEP clients have reported being routinely disconnected from telephone calls by agency workers. Written translation from the state government is almost impossible to accomplish, and further, clients over the years report going in person to the relevant agency but being turned away because agency staff refuse to provide an interpreter.

HB 1473 greatly increases access to Maryland state services, to which these Maryland residents are unquestionably entitled. The law requires meaningful language access. This must include outreach, clearer communication, and stronger oversight to ensure appropriate language access plans and resolution of violations. By improving and regularly monitoring language access programs, Maryland can help to ensure that all its residents, regardless of their primary language, have equal access to vital services and information.

**MLA strongly supports HB 1473 and urges this committee to issue a favorable report and passage by the General Assembly. For questions, please contact Cornelia Bright Gordon, [cbgordon@mdlabor.org](mailto:cbgordon@mdlabor.org).**

---

<sup>4</sup> Example, <https://oah.maryland.gov/pages/docs/aljcode.pdf>, [https://oah-maryland.gov.translate.google.com/pages/OAHvideos.html?\\_x\\_tr\\_sl=en&\\_x\\_tr\\_tl=fr&\\_x\\_tr\\_hl=en](https://oah-maryland.gov.translate.google.com/pages/OAHvideos.html?_x_tr_sl=en&_x_tr_tl=fr&_x_tr_hl=en).