



SUPPORT FOR HOUSE BILL 1473

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

House Health & Government Operations Committee

March 11, 2025

Dear Chair Peña-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

Maryland Hunger Solutions strongly supports HB 1473, which would require state departments, agencies and programs to establish a language access policy and plan as well as take other actions to ensure reasonable access to the entity's programs and activities for individuals with limited English proficiency. It also requires the Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs to provide oversight, monitoring, investigation and enforcement of certain language access provisions. Finally, it provides an annual appropriation to the Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs to support this work.

Our on-the-ground experience as an authorized SNAP outreach agency for the state of Maryland has given us a unique perspective on this issue. We provide this service both in-person and over-the-phone, where our toll-free hotline receives 300-400 calls per month from Marylanders seeking assistance with applying and renewing their benefits for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP. Of these calls, approximately 15-20% of them come from households with limited English proficiency (LEP) who request translation services.

Most of these LEP families have notified our staff of barriers they have faced regarding language access and receiving these critical benefits. Some of these barriers include, but are not limited to:

- Receiving correspondence (email, text, mail, etc.) in their non-preferred language;
- Long wait times on DHS Call Center, EBT Fraud Call Center, and local DSS office phone lines when asking for translation services, often longer than their non-translated counterparts;
- Being turned away from local DSS offices by security guards or staff due to lack of staff being able to provide language access; and
- No translation services provided during SNAP interviews and renewals, a required process for approval.

When these barriers occur, they can do substantial harm to the family or individual attempting to receive SNAP. The most common are delays in processing applications or renewal forms, while the most harmful are denials for services. Often these barriers are compounded as families do everything they can to establish services. For example, they may receive a notice requiring action to renew their benefits, but it arrives in their non-preferred language. To amend this, they attempt to contact the call center to gain understanding but are on hold for hours as they wait for a translator. If this fails, they try going to a local



office but are turned away because they do not speak English and no translators are available. Ultimately this can lead to eligible families and children being denied benefits they rely on.

Creating a robust language access plan for each agency and the state is the first step in ensuring these barriers are removed. Effective communication between these agencies and the families they serve is paramount. Language access services that help facilitate that communication ensure a much smoother process. This will promote compliance with state and federal language access laws so that language is not a barrier to accessing public services like SNAP for communities with limited English proficiency and disabilities. For every \$1 of SNAP benefits used in Maryland, roughly \$1.50 is generated in economic activity. Strengthening the access for SNAP eligible individuals and families regardless of their language or disability status, is a crucial investment for Maryland, overall.

HB 1473 recognizes the critical role the provision of language services plays in ensuring that individuals with limited English proficiency are afforded equal and meaningful access to government programs and activities.

In conclusion, we urge a favorable report for HB 1473. Thank you for your consideration.