

Maryland Equity Coalition for People with Disabilities Member Organizations

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

On behalf of the following 29 member organizations of the Maryland Equity Coalition for People with Disabilities, we support HB1473, which will require state agencies to create and enforce language access plans, providing translated materials and interpretation services, with built-in mechanisms for compliance monitoring and improvement.

Amigo Care ABA

The Arc Maryland

The Arc Prince George's County

Ascenda Foundation

Autism Society of Maryland

AVANZOS Educational and Behavioral Services

Chinese Culture and Community Services Center, Inc.

Choice and Control, Inc

Community Options, Inc

Disability Rights Maryland

Ethiopian Eritrean Special Needs Community

Jubilee Association of Maryland

Maryland Coalition of Families

Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council

Maryland Inclusive Housing

Montgomery County Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Inc

Parents' Place of Maryland

Partnership for Extraordinary Minds

People On the Go Maryland

Promoting Meaningful Interaction and Social Engagement (PROMISE)

Rock Creek Foundation

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, Office of Deaf and Disabilities Ministries

SEEC

Self Directed Advocacy Network of Maryland

Special Education Equal Development Society (SEEDS)

Speech Garden

SupAbilities

The Treatment and Learning Centers

University of Maryland College Park, Special Education Program

As organizations committed to supporting individuals with disabilities, **we understand**

the significant impact of language barriers on accessing crucial state services. In a 2023 report, members of our coalition highlighted demographic disparities among Hispanic individuals with disabilities in a letter to state leaders¹. The data revealed inequitable access for Hispanic people to vocational rehabilitation services and services at the Maryland Department of Health (ex: Autism Waiver services, housing opportunities, and Developmental Disabilities Administration's Home and Community Based Services waiver programs).

Our coalition member organizations have experienced a similar lack of access for other immigrant communities due to language barriers. We share **the following examples of challenges faced by individuals with disabilities due to inadequate language access:**

- Despite completing applications in Spanish and requesting communication in Spanish, families are still sent an eligibility determination letter in English. This creates unfair access issues and an administrative burden on these families applying for services.
- State agencies have incorrectly assessed needs for people with disabilities who speak languages other than English. Recently, DDA incorrectly assessed the level of care for a person who is Ethiopian American. The health risk-screening interview was conducted in English rather than in Amharic.
- Public information is not available in other languages, despite providing time sensitive and essential information to the community. The lack of interpretation services at public information sessions prevents individuals with disabilities from accessing essential resources in a timely and equitable way.
- Language access for people who are part of the Deaf community that use American Sign Language and a community that speaks a language other than English struggle to get the support they need. For example, the recent Supreme Court ruling in *Perez v. Sturgis Public Schools* found that the public school failed to language access in American Sign Language and Spanish for the student who was Deaf and Mexican American.

The Equal Access to Public Services for Individuals With Limited English Proficiency Bill addresses these challenges by mandating state agencies to develop Language Access Plans and creating compliance mechanisms. Language Access Plans aim to eliminate communication barriers and foster inclusivity for individuals with disabilities, regardless of linguistic background. Incorporating compliance mechanisms within the bill is crucial to ensure accountability and remove persistent barriers.

In addition, under the current federal administration, people with disabilities and people with limited English proficiency are facing new attacks on language access protections. Federal employees with disabilities are reporting not being granted workplace accommodations for language access, in violation of Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Americans with Disability Act. The National Association for the Deaf has also already requested the White House reinstate American Sign Language interpreting services for all news briefings and related events, threatening legal action if they do not comply. Spanish webpages for federal agencies, like FEMA and the White

¹ <https://www.jubileemd.org/download/enriqueciendo-vidas-advocacy-letter-october-2023-english-language/>

House, have been shut down in response to executive orders. It remains unclear what protections will be in place under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 given the changes at the U.S. Department of Justice. Finally, on March 1, 2025, the current administration issued an executive order, "Designating English as the Official Language of the United States." This order revokes the protection and support offered by previous administrations, such as Executive Order 13166, "Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency."

Now, more than ever, we need to support access for people with disabilities in our community. Given Maryland's diversity, strong language access in state agencies is essential to meet the varied language needs of its population. **We support HB 1473 as a step toward advancing equity and accessibility for all Marylanders.**

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