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President and General Counsel

Testimony in Support of House Bill 983: An Act Concerning Language Assistance for Voters

February 18, 2025

Good afternoon, Honorable Chair Vanessa E. Atterbear, Vice Chair Jheanelle K. Wilkins, and Esteemed Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Isabelle C. Muhlbauer, and I am the National Voting Rights Advocacy Manager at LatinoJustice PRLDEF. LatinoJustice PRLDEF uses and challenges laws to create a more just and equitable society. We transform harmful systems, empower our communities, fight for racial justice, and grow the next generation of líderes. I am writing to express our strong support for House Bill 983, which expands election-related language assistance for LEP voters in Maryland. This bill is a crucial step in ensuring that all eligible voters, regardless of their English proficiency, can fully exercise their fundamental right to vote.

Under the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA), only Montgomery and Prince George's Counties are required to provide Spanish-language election assistance. However, Maryland is the most diverse state on the East Coast, and according to the most recent census data, more than 425,000 Maryland residents statewide have limited English proficiency. We can and should do more to improve language access for our communities and make voting easier for minority populations speaking other languages. Language barriers must not continue to be an impediment to LEP communities that seek to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

HB 983 expands language access by lowering the federal language threshold, which under the VRA currently requires translation of election materials only in jurisdictions where a single language minority group comprises more than 10,000 citizens of voting age or 5% of the total voting-age population, to 2% or 4,000 of the voting-age citizen population in a jurisdiction. This bill ensures that eligible voters are not disenfranchised due to language barriers by requiring the State Board of Elections to identify languages meeting this threshold and mandating the translation of all election-related materials, excluding ballots. Additionally, it establishes a process for ensuring translation accuracy and encourages the recruitment of multilingual election judges to assist LEP voters at the polls.

Maryland is home to four of the most ethnically diverse municipalities in the nation, and nearly 79% of Maryland voters support expanding language assistance for voters with limited English proficiency. Uninhibited access to the ballot is at the core of a representative democracy. As such, we must continue to ensure that all voters, including historically marginalized communities, are able to freely have their voices heard through their vote. For these reasons, LatinoJustice PRLDEF urges a favorable report on HB 983.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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