



Live the life you want.

From: Ronza Othman, President

National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

15 Charles Plaza, #3002

Baltimore, MD 21201 president@nfbmd.org

To: House Ways and Means Committee

The members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland urge the house ways and Means Committee to give a favorable report to HB0879 - Language Acquisition Tracking Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children – Establishment. This bill establishes a language acquisition, assessment, and tracking program for deaf, deafblind, and hard-of-hearing students in K-12 schools.

The National Federation of the Blind of Maryland believes in the full capacity of our blind and deafblind members to live the lives they want, despite the attitudinal barriers others put in their way. A common misconception about deafblind people is that they cannot learn language, but we know this is not true. Deafblind people can communicate through verbal speech, Pro-Tactile American Sign Language (PTASL), or through various other means, and they deserve the same chance to learn as anyone else. We believe the program this bill establishes will help parents believe in their deafblind children the way we do, and will help deafblind children achieve their dreams.

Statistics show a severe amount of language deprivation for deaf and deafblind children, with only one to two percent of deafblind children receiving formal PTASL instruction. Additionally, due to the highly-specialized nature of this instruction, deafblind children may only receive a few hours a week, which is dreadfully insufficient in learning to communicate on par with non-deafblind peers. We feel that having a free program for children and parents will narrow the gap and enable deafblind children to flourish in all areas of life—academically, personally, etc. Eventually, more deafblind children will achieve the independence they are fully capable of.

We particularly appreciate the incorporation of parents, educators, and language acquisition strategies for program participants. This bill mandates regular assessments and, should the participant not be on-par with their non-disabled peers, the participant's IEP/504 (or related) plan will include explanations and new goals to help the participant catch up. Additionally, the participant and parents/guardians will receive education on language acquisition strategies, and educators will receive professional development opportunities.

We believe in disability representation in programs and organizations related to us. No one understands the disabled experience like people with disabilities do, and we are heartened by the clause in this bill specifically mandating that the program coordinator be deaf, deafblind, or hard-of-hearing. The bill also directs the program coordinator to appoint board members who are deaf, deafblind, and hard-of-hearing.

For those reasons and others, we ask for a favorable report on HB0879. For questions, please contact me at President@nfbmd.org or at 443-426-4110.