



**Maryland Association of the Deaf**  
**Written Testimony**  
**HB 879 – Language Acquisition Tracking Program for Deaf**  
**and Hard of Hearing Children**  
**Wednesday, February 25, 2026**  
**Position: Favorable**

**President**

Tina Joyner

The Maryland Association of the Deaf (MDAD) is a statewide organization dedicated to protecting and advancing the interests of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Marylanders in matters of accessibility, civil rights, and equity. There are approximately 1.2 million Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing individuals living in the State of Maryland.

**Vice President**

Jacob Leffler

We write to express our strong support for HB 879, sponsored by Delegate Bagnall, regarding the Language Acquisition Tracking Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children.

**Secretary**

Payal Sweet

HB 879 is not about determining which language or communication modality is better than another. It is about ensuring that every Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing child in Maryland develops strong, measurable language skills using the approach that works best for that individual child. The focus is language acquisition outcomes — not ideology.

**Treasurer**

Smita Kothari

The bill's emphasis on ages 0–8 is critical. These are the most important years for brain and language development. Currently, there is no mandatory statewide academic assessment until third grade. By that time, language delays may already have long-term academic and social consequences. This program ensures that Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing children are monitored for language milestones and benchmarks in their early developmental years — just as hearing children are — so that timely adjustments can be made when needed.

**Board Members**

Meredith DeSomma

Vikki Porter

Theo Conley

Kitty Fogarty

Bill Millios

Thelma Schroeder

HB 879 helps prevent language deprivation by creating a structured, statewide system to identify when a child is not meeting age-appropriate language benchmarks. Early identification allows families and professionals to make informed decisions and implement changes before delays become severe and costly to remediate.

Importantly, HB 879 strengthens support for parents. Families of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing children often face complex and emotional decisions during the earliest years of development. This program provides parents with clear benchmarks, accessible information, and coordinated guidance so they can make informed decisions about their child's language growth. Rather than replacing parental choice, the bill empowers families with meaningful data and early insight to ensure their child remains on track and receives appropriate support when needed.

The bill also strengthens — rather than duplicates — the existing system. It does not replace IEP and IFSP processes or early intervention services. Instead, it supplements current structures by improving coordination, transparency, and accountability. It provides families with clearer information and gives the state aggregate data to better understand trends and service gaps.

We also emphasize the importance of maintaining a balanced and representative Advisory Council. The Council should include diverse expertise and lived experience — including Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing adults, parents, educators, and language specialists — to ensure assessment tools and reporting practices remain child-centered, evidence-based, and outcome-focused.

In addition to improving educational readiness and equity, early language monitoring leads to long-term cost savings by reducing the need for intensive remediation services later in a child’s academic career. Strong early language foundations support stronger academic achievement, workforce readiness, and lifelong success.

HB 879 promotes equity, early intervention, accountability, and informed parental choice — all centered on what is best for the child.

We respectfully urge the Committee to give HB 879 a favorable report.

Thank you for your consideration.

MDAD Board of Directors