

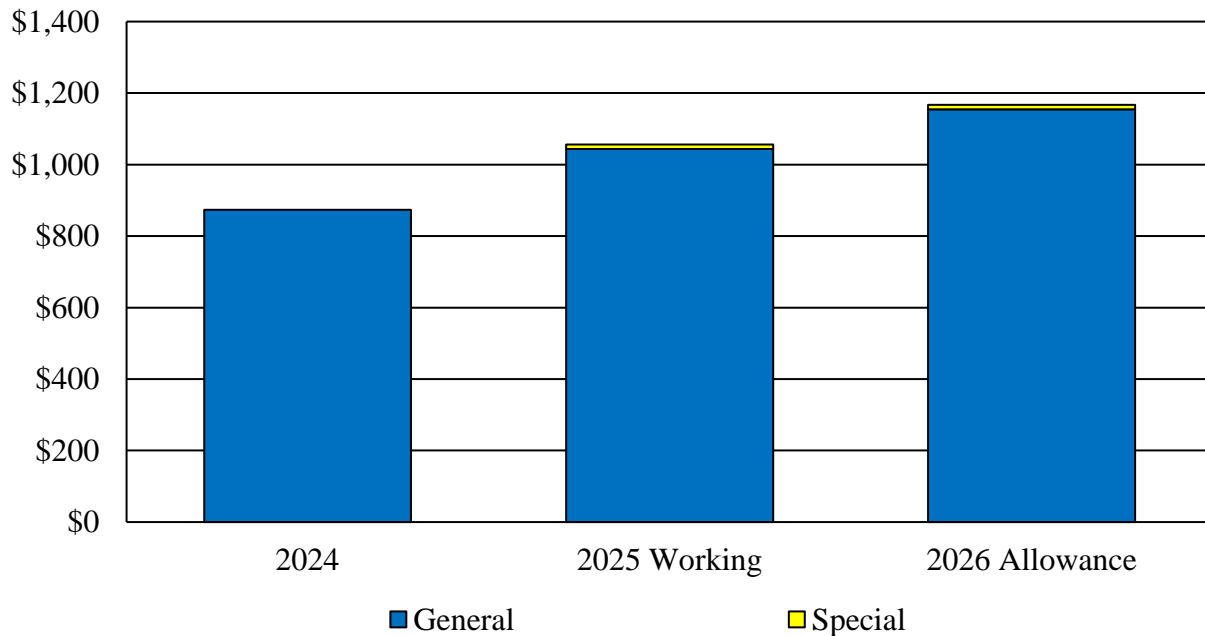
D11A0401
Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Program Description

The Governor’s Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) promotes the general welfare of Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals in Maryland by addressing policy gaps, providing expertise on issues relevant to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, and facilitating access to resources and services. ODHH also offers information and referral services to support community engagement. The office’s key goals include providing all Deaf and Hard of Hearing citizens equal and full access to State programs, resources, and services to fully participate in community life and enhancing awareness among Marylanders regarding the needs and challenges faced by individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Operating Budget Summary

Fiscal 2026 Budget Increases \$111,035, or 10.5%, to \$1.2 Million
(\$ in Thousands)



Note: The fiscal 2025 impacts of statewide salary adjustments are centrally budgeted in the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), and adjustments are not reflected in this agency’s budget. The fiscal 2026 impacts of the fiscal 2025 statewide salary adjustments appear in this agency’s budget. The fiscal 2026 statewide salary adjustments are centrally budgeted in DBM and are not included in this agency’s budget. The fiscal 2025 working appropriation and fiscal 2026 allowance each include \$12,000 in special funds.

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Fiscal 2025

Implementation of Legislative Priorities

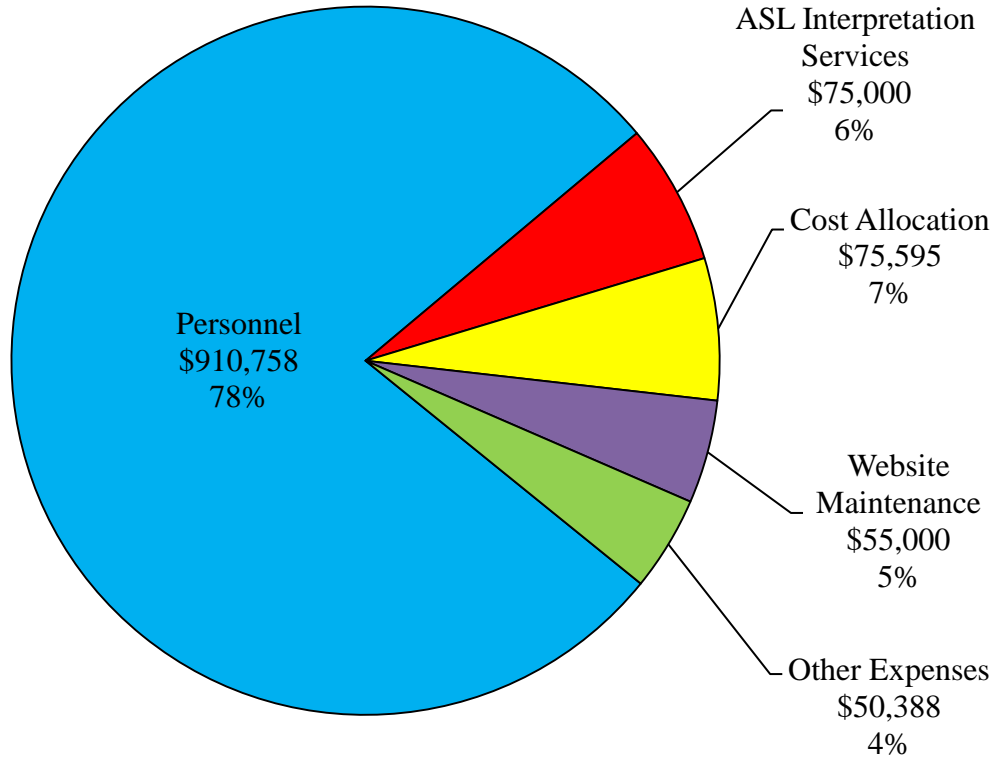
Chapters 442 and 443 of 2024 established a Workgroup for the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing to study and make recommendations regarding services, programs, advocacy, outreach, and other efforts to improve the quality of life of individuals who are Deaf, DeafBlind, or Hard of Hearing. ODHH is required staff the workgroup. The workgroup is required to submit a report by June 1, 2025, on its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the General Assembly. The workgroup terminates June 30, 2026. Section 21 of the fiscal 2025 Budget Bill added \$10,000 in general funds for ODHH for interpretation services necessary for the workgroup.

ODHH indicates that the workgroup held its first meeting on November 19, 2024, and has since undertaken work including data collection and developing recommendations. The workgroup has agreed to meet every three weeks and has scheduled seven meeting dates for calendar 2025. An ODHH staff member has been assigned to support the workgroup, and ODHH plans to hire an intern to assist with the group's activities. ODHH has indicated that the \$10,000, added in Section 21, will be used for interpreter services, including four hearing interpreters and two Deaf interpreters, to ensure accessibility for DeafBlind participants during Zoom meetings.

Fiscal 2026 Overview of Agency Spending

The fiscal 2026 allowance for ODHH totals \$1.2 million. As shown in **Exhibit 1**, personnel expenditures account for the majority of the budget, comprising 78% of the total fiscal 2026 allowance. The second-largest portion, 7%, is allocated to cost allocations, while 6% is designated for sign language interpreting services, which support both internal operations and public meetings.

Exhibit 1
Overview of Agency Spending
Fiscal 2026 Allowance
(\$ in Thousands)



ASL: American Sign Language

Note: The fiscal 2026 statewide salary adjustments are centrally budgeted in the Department of Budget and Management and are not included in this agency's budget.

Source: Governor's Fiscal 2026 Budget Books

Proposed Budget Change

Compared to the fiscal 2025 working appropriation, the fiscal 2026 allowance increases by \$111,035, or 10.5%. As shown in **Exhibit 2**, the primary driver of this increase are changes in personnel including employee and retiree health insurance (\$47,454) and salaries and fringe benefits primarily due to the impact of fiscal 2025 cost-of-living adjustments and increments (\$26,753). Additional operating costs also contribute to the growth, such as a \$13,132 expansion of the agency's outreach efforts. As part of this initiative, ODDH has been

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supporting the State Board of Sign Language Interpreters (SBSLI) in addressing board-related items, primarily focusing on the portal and associated programs, as well as conducting outreach campaigns across the State of Maryland. The agency has indicated plans to enhance community engagement by hosting town halls and other programs aimed at marginalized communities, including Deaf interpreters, interpreters of color, and DeafBlind interpreters. Additionally, ODDH is working to provide dedicated spaces for regular town hall meetings, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all interpreters.

**Exhibit 2
Proposed Budget
Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
(\$ in Thousands)**

	General Fund	Special Fund	Total
How Much It Grows:			
Fiscal 2024 Actual	\$873	\$0	\$873
Fiscal 2025 Working Appropriation	1,044	12	1,056
Fiscal 2026 Allowance	<u>1,155</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>1,167</u>
Fiscal 2025-2026 Amount Change	\$111	\$0	\$111
Fiscal 2025-2026 Percent Change	10.6%		10.5%
 Where It Goes:			<u>Change</u>
Personnel Expenses			
Employee and retiree health insurance			\$47
Salary increases and associated fringe benefits including fiscal 2025 cost-of-living adjustments and increments			27
Other Changes			
Cost allocations.....			20
Expansion of outreach efforts for the agency and the sign interpreters’ portal.....			13
Increased demand for sign language interpretation to support increased staff needs			5
Decrease related to one-time equipment expenses for new positions and equipment replacement			-7
Other expenses.....			6
Total			\$111

Note: Numbers may not sum to total due to rounding.

Personnel Data

	<u>FY 24</u> <u>Actual</u>	<u>FY 25</u> <u>Working</u>	<u>FY 26</u> <u>Allowance</u>	<u>FY 25-26</u> <u>Change</u>
Regular Positions	5.00	7.00	7.00	0.00
Contractual FTEs	<u>1.00</u>	<u>1.00</u>	<u>1.00</u>	<u>0.00</u>
Total Personnel	6.00	8.00	8.00	0.00

Vacancy Data: Regular Positions

Turnover and Necessary Vacancies, Excluding New Positions	0.00	0.00%
Positions and Percentage Vacant as of 12/31/24	4.00	57.14%
Vacancies Above Turnover	4.00	

- As of December 31, 2024, ODHH had 4 positions that have been vacant for less than nine months. Regarding these vacancies, the fiscal 2025 budget allocated 4 new positions to ODHH—2 through a proposed deficiency and 2 additional positions in the fiscal 2025 allowance. These positions included a deputy director, an outreach and interpreter manager, a compliance officer, and an administrative assistant to support the expanded scope and functions outlined in the Maryland Sign Language Interpreters Act.
- From these 4 added positions, ODHH reported that the Outreach and Interpreter Manager position was filled in July 2024, and the Administrative Assistant position was filled in August 2024. Regarding the status of the remaining 2 new positions and the other 2 vacant positions, ODHH indicated that the 4 vacant roles are deputy director, compliance officer, policy manager, and public relations officer. The agency further noted that the policy manager and public relations officer positions have not yet been advertised, as their current priority is filling the deputy director and compliance officer roles. **ODHH should comment on the status of the vacant positions, including the agency’s current recruitment efforts, and any challenges it may be facing in filling these roles.**

Key Observations

1. State Board of Sign Language Interpreters’ Formation and Operation

Chapters 269 and 270 of 2023 (Maryland Sign Language Interpreters Act) established SBSLI under ODHH. SBSLI, supported by ODHH, has been established to oversee the licensure and regulation of sign language interpreters in Maryland. Throughout calendar 2023, ODHH worked with the Governor’s office to appoint board members and start defining licensing requirements for sign language interpretation in the State. Committee narrative in the 2024 *Joint Chairmen’s Report* (JCR) requested that ODHH submit a report on the board’s formation and operation. The report outlines the board’s progress, including the following updates as of January 2025.

Board Composition

SBSLI board currently consists of seven seats, of which five are filled and two remain vacant. As of December 2023, six out of seven members had been appointed. However, one member has since stepped down, leaving two vacancies. The filled positions include the board chair, vice chair, and representatives for the Maryland Association of the Deaf and the Maryland DeafBlind community.

The vacant positions are designated for representatives from the Potomac Chapter of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and a general community representative. ODHH has indicated that it is collaborating closely with the Appointments Office to fill these vacancies and is actively identifying suitable candidates.

Regulations and Licensing Portal and Database

ODHH has focused on developing a user-friendly online portal to streamline the application process, with input from the community and SBSLI board members. While the board has focused on developing comprehensive licensing regulations. Regulations have been drafted and are currently under review with the Office of the Attorney General’s Division of State Documents. They are awaiting the completion of an economic impact analysis before being posted in the *Maryland Register*. Once approved, these regulations will be available to the public on the ODHH website.

The licensing portal is ready for public use but will not be launched until the regulations are officially posted to ensure alignment with fee structures and other requirements. ODHH has hosted three information sessions to familiarize applicants with the portal’s functionality. According to the agency, the licensing database, integrated within the online portal, will provide transparency and facilitate verification of interpreter credentials. Using the database, interpreters can monitor their application progress through a personalized dashboard. In addition, the database will also serve as a public directory for users to verify interpreter licensure.

Public Engagement and Communication

To ensure interpreters and the broader community stay informed, SBSLI and ODHH have undertaken the following outreach efforts.

- Sharing updates are through Town Hall meetings, ODHH website, and a Frequently Asked Questions section.
- Holding portal demonstrations including recent ones held at the Community College of Baltimore County, Salisbury University, and a virtual session, accessible online for those unable to attend.
- Hosting three Town Halls, six open meetings, and one special meeting to share updates and gather feedback from stakeholders.
- SBSLI is committed to supporting interpreters from marginalized groups, including Deaf and DeafBlind interpreters, interpreters of color, and Black interpreters. Future initiatives will include workshops, forums, and other programming tailored to these communities.

Application Fees and Complaint Processes

The board has structured application fees to ensure accessibility while exploring financial assistance options, such as potential grant opportunities to assist interpreters who may face financial barriers to licensure. Specifically, the application fees have been set to:

- ***Individual License:*** \$150 initial application fee, with a \$100 renewal each year.
- ***Provisional License:*** \$300 for a three-year license, renewable once for an additional two years at \$100.

The board and the Office of Administrative Hearing has developed multiple channels for filing complaints, ensuring that interpreter misconduct is addressed appropriately:

- ***Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID):*** Complaints against RID-certified interpreters are handled through the RID Ethical Practices System.
- ***Maryland Courts:*** Complaints involving court-appointed interpreters are managed by the Court Interpreter Program Administrator.
- ***Department of Justice (DOJ):*** Issues regarding business or government entities failing to provide effective communication may be directed to DOJ.

- ***Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC):*** Workplace-related complaints involving interpreters can be filed with EEOC.
- ***Immigration Court Interpreter Complaints:*** The Executive Office for Immigration Review addresses concerns related to interpreters in immigration court.

Performance Metrics and Evaluation

To assess the program’s effectiveness, SBSLI and ODHH will use various performance metrics. User feedback, including feedback on the portal and public comments, will be analyzed to enhance the user experience. Additionally, the data analyses will focus on metrics such as application completion rates, issues faced by users, and user engagement levels, which will provide insights into the licensing system’s overall effectiveness.

Operating Budget Recommended Actions

1. Concur with Governor's allowance.

Appendix 1
2024 Joint Chairmen’s Report Responses from Agency

The 2024 JCR requested that ODHH prepare one report. Electronic copies of the full JCR responses can be found on the Department of Legislative Services Library website.

- ***Update on State Board of Sign Language Interpreters:*** ODHH submitted a report on the board’s formation and operation, including a list of board members, progress toward establishing State sign language licensing requirements, Maryland registry and public database of sign language interpreters, strategies undertaken or planned to support interpreters through the licensing process and reach unlicensed interpreters, methods employed to set the fee schedule and rates, collect fees, and provide financial assistance with fees, methods employed to receive and process complaints of interpreter fraud, and key performance indicators. Further discussion of this information can be found in Key Observation 1 of this analysis.

**Appendix 2
Audit Findings**

Audit Period for Last Audit:	November 19, 2018 – February 28, 2023
Issue Date:	April 2024
Number of Findings:	0
Number of Repeat Findings:	0
% of Repeat Findings:	N/A
Rating: (if applicable)	

The audit did not disclose any findings.

**Appendix 3
Object/Fund Difference Report
Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing**

<u>Object/Fund</u>	<u>FY 24 Actual</u>	<u>FY 25 Working Appropriation</u>	<u>FY 26 Allowance</u>	<u>FY 25 - FY 26 Amount Change</u>	<u>Percent Change</u>
Positions					
01 Regular	5.00	7.00	7.00	0.00	0%
02 Contractual	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.00	0%
Total Positions	6.00	8.00	8.00	0.00	0%
Objects					
01 Salaries and Wages	\$ 373,447	\$ 799,647	\$ 873,674	\$ 74,027	9.3%
02 Technical and Special Fees	10,864	36,684	37,084	400	1.1%
03 Communication	654	950	2,788	1,838	193.5%
04 Travel	420	19,331	21,500	2,169	11.2%
08 Contractual Services	474,363	179,081	217,595	38,514	21.5%
09 Supplies and Materials	1,641	5,097	6,000	903	17.7%
10 Equipment – Replacement	7,107	0	4,500	4,500	N/A
11 Equipment – Additional	1,799	11,516	0	-11,516	-100.0%
13 Fixed Charges	3,000	3,400	3,600	200	5.9%
Total Objects	\$ 873,295	\$ 1,055,706	\$ 1,166,741	\$ 111,035	10.5%
Funds					
01 General Fund	\$ 873,295	\$ 1,043,706	\$ 1,154,741	\$ 111,035	10.6%
03 Special Fund	0	12,000	12,000	0	0%
Total Funds	\$ 873,295	\$ 1,055,706	\$ 1,166,741	\$ 111,035	10.5%

Note: The fiscal 2026 allowance does not include contingent reductions or cost-of-living adjustments.