

October 23, 2023



**Dear Governor Moore, Secretary Beatty, Secretary Herrera Scott,
Interim State Superintendent Wright, and Maryland Legislators:**

We are a coalition of Maryland disability organizations seeking equitable access to life-changing disability services for Hispanic and all other underserved Marylanders. Our coalition is called *Enriqueciendo Vidas*, meaning “enriching lives,” which is what disability services do for people who are fortunate to access them. Each coalition partner serves Spanish-speaking and immigrant disability communities in Maryland; through our work we have become intimately aware of the barriers people face when trying to access services.

Data show that Hispanic people are underrepresented among disability service recipients in Maryland. Although 12 percent of Maryland’s population is Hispanic, only two percent to four percent of the people accessing disability housing programs, vocational rehabilitation services, and long-term care for people with developmental disabilities are Hispanic. Accessing our state’s disability services currently means navigating a complex system that is nearly exclusively in English without support sensitive to the unique needs of Maryland’s Hispanic and immigrant communities. Maryland and Federal laws already require disability services to be equitably offered to people with limited English proficiency. We now need concrete action to make disability services meaningfully accessible to Marylanders who are currently underserved.

We have two immediately actionable recommendations:

1. Require Language Access Plans and provide funding for their implementation.

Each of the three Maryland agencies responsible for disability services should create and implement Language Access Plans. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD) report not having a Language Access Plan. While the Maryland Department of Health (MDH) has a policy, our experience shows it is not being implemented effectively.

For example, an MDH eligibility notice tells participants they can request information in other languages by calling a phone number. This number reaches a message recorded in English without options to hear the message in other languages.

Effective Language Access Plans will include instructions for translating documents, providing interpretation (including at all public forums), training staff on how to effectively use interpreters, and publishing glossaries of frequently used technical language. The plans will also provide for notices of rights and instructions on how to access language services, request translated documents or interpretation, and make complaints when language services are not provided.

Effective Language Access Plans should be required for MDOD, MSDE, and MDH with an accompanying and ongoing appropriation to support implementation.

2. Fund grants to the nonprofit sector to provide outreach, education, training, and individualized guidance to underserved populations. The Maryland nonprofit sector has experience with disability services, reaching underserved populations, providing assistance in multiple languages, and teaching self-advocacy skills. This experience, along with the trust we've built with the community, makes nonprofits equipped to address the complex barriers to access for underserved communities.

Nonprofit partners can help people overcome barriers that include lack of technology access, low literacy levels, poverty, language, lack of background knowledge about services, and immigration status concerns. With help from a trusted guide from a local nonprofit, people with disabilities and their families can navigate the service landscape even as state agencies and service providers grow their capacity to serve more diverse populations.

It is important for these grants to be multi-year to enable organizations to establish programming and become reliable resources among target communities.

Disability services are meant to make our world more inclusive and accessible. It's time to also make disability services themselves more inclusive and accessible. Please join us in supporting legislation to require and fund a more equitable disability service system.

To learn more, contact Lisa Lorraine at llorraine@jubileemd.org or 240-531-3478. Lisa chairs the Enriqueciendo Vidas Advocacy Coalition and leads the Breaking Barriers program at Jubilee Association of Maryland.

Sincerely,

The undersigned members for the Enriqueciendo Vidas Advocacy Coalition



Data Highlights

14% of Maryland public school students with the disability code “Autism” are Hispanic, but only **4%** of the state’s Autism waiver program participants are Hispanic.

Maryland’s population is 12% Hispanic, but

- Only **4%** of DORS Vocational Rehabilitation participants are Hispanic.
- Only **3%** of individuals entering Maryland’s Developmental Disabilities Administration services are Hispanic.
- Only **1.6%** of 376 individuals housed through the HUD 811 Project Rental Assistance program are Hispanic.

Maryland State Agency Race/Ethnicity Data

Publicly Available Data <i>With source links</i>	State of Maryland 2022 ACS Estimates	Entered into service with DDA in FY22	On DDA waiting list As of October 27, 2022	DORS VR 2021	DORS Pre-ETS Report dated 10/26/22	Autism Waiver June 30, 2022
White	48%	46%	43%	42%	44%	32%
Black or African American	30%	41%	37%	47%	45%	33%
Hispanic/Latino of any race	12%	3%	4%	4%	6%	4%
Asian	7%	5%	5%	3%	4%	6%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.2%	0.3%	0.3%	1%	1%	unk*
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	0.3%		
Two or More Races	3%	0.3%	0.7%	3%		
Unknown		4%				25%

*Data showed Hispanic and Native American combined as “Other” totaling 4% of Autism waiver participants

Sources: https://planning.maryland.gov/MSDC/Pages/pop_estimate/popest-agr.aspx
https://dlslibrary.state.md.us/publications/JCR/2022/2022_112-113.pdf
<https://marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/2022/0927/DataDeepDiveStudentsWithDisabilities.pdf>
https://marylandpublicschools.org/programs/Documents/Gov-Rel/DORS_Presentation_10.6.2022_A.pdf

Maryland Race/Ethnicity Data Reported by the Maryland Department of Disabilities on 9/5/23 for Housing Programs

Data reflects all individuals since program inception in 2012

	Weinberg Program Housed Individuals	811 Program Housed Individuals	Weinberg Program Waitlist Individuals	811 Program Waitlist Individuals
White	9	113	1463	1848
Black or African American	33	296	3375	4047
Asian	1	5	57	3%
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	1	8	63	73
Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	0	1	12	18
Unknown	1	21	419	345
Hispanic/Latino	1	6	105	150
Not-Hispanic	43	370	4663	5692

Developmental Disability Administration (DDA) FY22 Waiver Entry Demographics Compared to County Populations

July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022, Five Maryland Counties with Largest Hispanic Populations

	Montgomery	Prince George's	Baltimore County	Anne Arundel	Baltimore City
% Hispanic Population in County	20.5%	21.2%	7.2%	9.7%	7.8%
Hispanic FY22 DDA Waiver Enrollees	9.7%	1.9%	0.5%	0.0%	2.2%
Total Number of DDA Waiver Enrollees	185	108	219	64	90

Source: https://dlslibrary.state.md.us/publications/JCR/2022/2022_112-113.pdf

Stories

“I would always register for meetings, but there would be no interpreter. I always wrote that I needed an interpreter when it was an option. Sometimes I would join a meeting only to listen in English. I left because there was no interpreter, and I didn’t understand. Many meetings don’t have interpreters.”

Victoria Lopez, Montgomery County *(translated from Spanish)*

“When I participate in meetings with the schools, the interpreters almost always tell me half of the things being said. They don’t tell me what is really being said. They can’t explain things to me. I feel like my son hasn’t received adequate services. It’s been very difficult for me to get them. I feel like it’s discrimination. If I could communicate better or if they could explain things better, maybe I would have better services for him.”

Araceli Aguirre, St. Mary’s County *(translated from Spanish)*

“A Spanish-speaking mom of two children with autism called me to get help applying to DDA. Even though the application is available in Spanish, this mom did not feel that she would be able to complete the application correctly. I contacted DDA’s regional office to find out if they could assist the mother. Unfortunately, they told me that they were not able to help. I reached out to the children’s school and was told that they were unfamiliar with the DDA application. After I gave the school staff some guidance on how to complete the application packet, they felt comfortable and were able to help the mother complete the application packages for her children. Without me there to help navigate and advocate, the family would have never been able to submit the applications.”

Jimara Kocik, bilingual volunteer and board member for
Howard County Autism Society