



October 7, 2024

To the Honorable City Council President, Nick Mosby and
Members of the Baltimore City Council
Room 409, City Hall
100 N. Holliday Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

Re: City Council Bill 24-0584 – Baltimore City Government Entities – Language Access.

The Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MIMA) is herein reporting on City Council Bill 24-0584 – Baltimore City Government Entities – Language Access. MIMA supports Bill 24-0584 seeking to codify language access to achieve federal compliance and ensure that Limited English Proficient individuals have equitable access to essential city services.

Baltimore City is home to almost 57,000 individuals (10.3% of the city's population) who speak a language other than English at home, and over 20,000 of those individuals speak English less than very well. These individuals are *Limited English Proficient (LEP)*, meaning that they do not speak English as their primary language and have limited ability to speak, write, or understand English. Currently, the top five languages spoken by LEP individuals in Baltimore are: Spanish (9,659), Arabic, (1,622), Chinese (1,515), French (1,451), and Korean (658). It is important to note that the number of LEP individuals is likely underreported due to language limitations in data collection tools, meaning the actual need for language access may be even greater.

LEP individuals bring diverse perspectives, skills, and experiences that enrich our City, but they also face unique challenges as they navigate City services. Not only are they navigating the challenges of a new culture and home, but the limited availability of information in their languages presents a barrier to learning and acclimating to a new environment.

MIMA's Current and Ongoing Efforts

Since 2019, MIMA has worked with over a dozen City agencies to help them comply with existing Language Access requirements. These efforts have focused on developing tools, protocols, and resources to ensure that agencies can deliver services in ways that remove language barriers to essential City services for LEP residents. MIMA's work aligns with the federal mandates, *Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*, *Federal Executive Order 13166 – Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency*, and with local policy, the *Language Access Policy* issued by the City's Chief Administrator (CAO Policy) in February 2024.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act states that, "No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." The category of "national origin" is interpreted to include language. *Federal Executive Order 13166* more specifically mandates language assistance and defines language access requirements in federal assisted programs. The *CAO Policy* directs certain Baltimore City agencies that provide direct services or emergency information to the public, to engage in the language planning process, and consult with MIMA to ensure compliance with federal law.

MIMA's Current Role

To support agencies with achieving compliance with language access requirements under existing policies, MIMA currently provide the following services:

- Provides assistance completing a four-factor analysis, or needs assessment, of City agencies' current language access activities, services, and protocols;

- Manages a centralized budget for language access services, specifically oral interpretation and written translation of vital documents;
- Provides language access resources (telephonic interpretation, document translation, and staff training) to City agencies;
- Manages contracts for interpretation and translation services;
- Provides assistance developing language access plans; and
- Provides training City agency staff on language access policies and services.

Strengthening Language Access with Bill 24-0584

The proposed legislation builds on these efforts and includes new provisions to strengthen the existing policy and practices, including:

- Defining “covered entities”, meaning the government offices, departments, and entities, that will be required to comply with local language access requirements;
- Designating MIMA as the office responsible for coordinating the implementation of the City’s Language Access Policy, and monitoring and oversight activities, to ensure covered entities’ compliance with all applicable language access policies;
- Outlining the City’s responsibility to overcome language barriers experienced by LEP individuals when seeking services;
- Establishing the steps to provide LEP individuals with meaningful access to services;
- Requiring language access plans that will be created and implemented by covered entities, in consultation with MIMA; and
- Requiring covered entities to submit annual reports on their language access activities to MIMA.

Rationale for the Legislation:

1. **Establishes a lasting commitment to delivering equitable City services.** Bill 24-0584 formalizes the CAO’s existing directive, ensuring a lasting commitment to equitable service delivery for all City residents, including LEP individuals.
2. **Builds on current policy and best practices.** The bill incorporates the framework of the existing CAO Policy, MIMA’s years of experience in implementing language access measures within City agencies, as well as best practices from local jurisdictions such as Washington D.C., Montgomery County, Philadelphia, and others. If approved, Baltimore City will join a network of localities that have introduced and passed legislation to establish a local language access law.
3. **Ensures federal compliance.** As a recipient of federal funding, the City is required to provide language assistance to LEP individuals. This legislation would strengthen the City’s ability to meet those requirements by formalizing local protocols, so they align with federal guidelines. It would also position the City to maintain compliance with federal law and remain eligible for future federal funding opportunities.

For the reasons stated, the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs supports City Council Bill 24-0584. Establishing Baltimore City’s Language Access Policy as local law aligns with the City’s commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. MIMA stands ready to serve as a hub for technical assistance and resources to City agencies, ensuring that LEP residents have the access they need to thrive in Baltimore regardless of the language they speak.

For additional questions or concerns, please contact:

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