

Department of Legislative Services
 Maryland General Assembly
 2025 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
Third Reader - Revised

House Bill 983

(Delegates Mireku-North and Wilkins)

Ways and Means

Education, Energy, and the Environment

Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language Assistance Program

This bill establishes a Language Assistance Program, in which (1) the State Board of Elections (SBE) must identify, based on specified criteria, counties in which there is a significant need for language assistance for voters in the county in a language or languages other than English and (2) local boards of elections in counties SBE has identified must provide specified language assistance services, including the option for a voter to communicate with election judges at an early voting center or Election Day polling place through a translator available by video conference technology. SBE must publish and maintain on its website a list of the local boards that must provide language assistance under the program by January 1, 2026.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: General fund expenditures increase by \$50,000 in FY 2026, 2028, and 2030. Revenues are not affected.

(in dollars)	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030
Revenues	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
GF Expenditure	50,000	0	50,000	0	50,000
Net Effect	(\$50,000)	\$0	(\$50,000)	\$0	(\$50,000)

Note: () = decrease; GF = general funds; FF = federal funds; SF = special funds; - = indeterminate increase; (-) = indeterminate decrease

Local Effect: Local government expenditures are expected to increase, as discussed below. Revenues are not affected. **This bill imposes a mandate on a unit of local government.**

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Bill Summary:

Language Assistance Program, In General

The bill establishes a Language Assistance Program and requires a local board of elections to participate in the program if SBE determines there is a significant need for language assistance to voters in the county in a language other than English.

Each local board that is required to participate in the program must, with the assistance of SBE, provide to voters the language assistance services required by the bill.

SBE may adopt regulations to carry out the bill.

Determination of Need for Language Assistance and Designated Languages

SBE must determine that a significant need for language assistance to voters exists in a county if, based on the best available data, including information from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey or data of comparable quality collected by a public office:

- more than 2% of the citizen voting age population of the county use a single shared language other than English and have limited English proficiency; or
- more than 4,000 individuals of the citizen voting age population of the county use a single shared language other than English and have limited English proficiency.

“Limited English proficiency” means that an individual (1) speaks a particular language other than English; (2) does not speak English as a primary language; and (3) speaks, reads, or understands the English language less than “very well,” as reported in available U.S. Census Bureau data or data of comparable quality collected by a public office.

SBE must determine that each language other than English that is used by individuals that make up more than 2%, or number more than 4,000, of the citizen voting age population of the county, and have limited English proficiency, is a designated language.

By January 1, 2026, SBE must (1) publish and maintain on its website a list of each local board that is required to provide language assistance in a language other than English and each designated language in which the language assistance is required to be provided by the local board and (2) update the information published and maintained at least every two years.

SBE must promptly notify each local board included on the list of the bill's language assistance requirements.

Language Assistance Services

Each local board that is required to participate in the program must, with the assistance of SBE, provide to voters the following services:

- at each early voting center and Election Day polling place, the option for a voter who has a need for language assistance in a designated language to communicate with the election judges through a translator who is made available by means of video conference technology;
- signage in each early voting center and Election Day polling place in each designated language notifying voters that language assistance and interpretation services are available; and
- online voting materials (voter registration forms, absentee ballot applications, specimen ballots, and forms and instructions SBE determines appropriate to facilitate voting) in each designated language.

A local board may provide solely oral instructions or other assistance if the language does not have a written form, such as sign language.

The local board must make reasonable efforts to recruit bilingual election judges to provide assistance to voters in designated languages and may provide additional language assistance services not required by the bill.

Current Law: Under [Section 203](#) of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, states and political subdivisions that meet specified thresholds of numbers of citizens of voting age who are members of a specified single language minority and are limited-English proficient must provide any registration or voting notices, forms, instructions, assistance, or other materials or information relating to the electoral process, including ballots, in the language of the applicable minority group as well as in the English language. If the language of the applicable minority group is oral or unwritten, or in the case of Alaskan natives and American Indians, if the predominant language is historically unwritten, the State or political subdivision is only required to furnish oral instructions, assistance, or other information relating to registration and voting.

In general, a state or political subdivision is subject to Section 203 if the Director of the Census determines, based on specified data, that:

- (1) more than 5% of the citizens of voting age of such state or political subdivision are members of a single language minority and are limited-English proficient;

(2) more than 10,000 of the citizens of voting age of such political subdivision are members of a single language minority and are limited-English proficient; or (3) in the case of a political subdivision that contains all or any part of an Indian reservation, more than 5% of the American Indian or Alaska Native citizens of voting age within the Indian reservation are members of a single language minority and are limited-English proficient; and

- the illiteracy rate of the citizens in the language minority group is higher than the national illiteracy rate.

State Expenditures: General fund expenditures increase by \$50,000 in fiscal 2026 and every two fiscal years thereafter to hire a demographics consultant to assist SBE in determining, every two years, which local boards must provide language assistance under the program, and in which designated languages, based on the best available data.

This estimate assumes that the bill's requirement that local boards participating in the program provide online voting materials (including voter registration forms and absentee ballot applications) in each designated language is not interpreted to require that SBE's online voter registration and mail-in ballot request system incorporate designated languages.

Local Expenditures: Local government expenditures are expected to increase for counties that must participate in the program to cover (1) costs of video conference devices (phones, tablets), and services, to provide language assistance in designated languages, at each early voting center and Election Day polling place, through a translator available by video conference technology; (2) costs for signage at early voting centers and Election Day polling places indicating the availability of language assistance; and (3) costs of written translation services needed to provide online voting materials in each designated language.

Overall local government costs to comply with the bill cannot be reliably estimated at this time, due in part to not knowing the number of counties that will need to participate in the program. *For illustrative purposes*, however, it appears that costs for a larger county may be in the range of \$40,000 to provide language assistance services under the bill for the first primary and general election in which the county participates in the program. Information is not readily available to estimate costs for subsequent elections, however, costs for subsequent elections presumably are significantly less and include costs of (1) device wireless data plans; (2) video and written translation services; and (3) any device or signage replacements. This estimate is based on:

- information provided by SBE regarding costs incurred by Prince George's County, of approximately \$37,000, for video conference language translation technology (consisting of smart phones, tablet kiosks, and a language translation service,

deployed to early voting centers, Election Day polling places, and the local board headquarters) during the 2024 presidential election cycle;

- an expectation, based on local board estimates for voting location signage, that one-time signage costs will not be more than \$5,000 and may be less, potentially in the range of \$3,000; and
- an expectation that costs of written translation services are relatively minimal based on (1) costs provided by SBE for written translation services under a State master contract; (2) the fact that there is a certain amount of existing translation of statewide voting materials; and (3) the potential for translation of additional statewide voting materials to be coordinated among counties that must provide language assistance services under the program in the same designated language(s), reducing costs.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has been introduced within the last three years. See HB 563 of 2024.

Designated Cross File: SB 685 (Senator Augustine) - Education, Energy, and the Environment.

Information Source(s): Howard, Montgomery, and Prince George's counties; Department of General Services; Maryland State Board of Elections; Department of Legislative Services

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