Maryland
DEPARTMENT OF AGING

Wes Moore | Governor | Aruna Miller | Lt. Governor | Carmel Roques | Secretary

May 1, 2025

Re: Request for Information Regarding Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Populations

We are writing in response to your recent inquiry with respect to data collection efforts at the Maryland Department of Aging (MDOA) that are inclusive of deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing communities. The majority of Maryland Department of Aging program delivery does not occur at MDOA, but at the local level through designated Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) which are all housed in county governments and non-profits. Although this population is served throughout our network, it is not a demographic that is documented regularly due to the lack of requirements to do so in our significant federally funded work. Please see the data and information below regarding services provided by the aging network and future plans to improve accessibility and service utilization for this population.

Maryland Access Point Referrals: 6,624 referrals for assistive technology in FY25

While MAP does not collect any data specific to this population, these assistive technology interactions often include technology support for visual/hearing impairments, among other non-visual/hearing-related equipment.

Senior Care Program: 27 requests in FY25 for assistance with devices to assist with Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing needs. These constituents are referred to Starkey Foundation, Charitable Organizations, Lions Club, MDTAP, or gap-filling funds are used as available through Local Emergency Grants.

Hearing Screenings: Offered by 8 senior centers regularly while all senior centers offer hearing screenings when hosting health fairs.

Hard of Hearing (HOH) Seminars: AAA's offer healthy living seminars which include HOH topics.

Examples of Regional Vision and Hearing-Related Services and Supports (from National Family Caregiver Support Program representatives):

- **Frederick County:**
  Offers ASL interpretation and communication support across programs,

including through contracted providers and for events like Veterans' Appreciation Day. Refers clients to local nonprofits such as the Center for Independent Living (Freedom Center) for hearing aids and assistive devices.

- **Montgomery County:**
  Access HEARS grant in place which provides over-the-counter hearing aids and personal sound amplifiers. The Fire Department provides specialized smoke alarms (with neon lights and bed shakers) for deaf/hard of hearing residents.
- **Charles County:**
  Willing to fund hearing aids and assistive devices (e.g., pocket talkers) through Senior Care, NFCSP, or Title III-B funds, though recent requests have been limited. Senior centers have hosted audiologists in the past for hearing exams.
- **Prince George's County:**
  While disability-specific data is not tracked, the SHIP program provides guidance on Medicare Advantage plans that cover hearing services and connects residents with local screening resources. SHIP received 20 related inquiries in the past 6 months. Referrals are made to resources including Lion's Club and Earcoustic.
- **Howard County:**

  Hosts a Sign Language class at the Ellicott City 50+ Center. Howard Co. also has audio equipment installed at all 50+ Centers that allows for someone who is hard of hearing to utilize a hearing assistance device. Lastly, hearing screenings are regularly at the Bain 50+ Center.

MDOA's future work related to this population:

- MDOA is onboarding a summer intern who will focus on identifying strategies to improve the accessibility of the programs and services offered as part of the Long-Term Services Division including MAP Information and Assistance services.

- Senior Call Check and Social Connections: this program is being restructured as a result of successful departmental legislation, SB223/HB158 in 2025. This will expand the service to more types of communications beyond audio telephone calls. The bill confirms integration with the Telecommunications Access Program of MD (TAM) as a partner for outreach and the provision of telecommunications access equipment. An important goal with this legislation was to make this program more accessible to anyone over the age of 60 that is deaf, hearing impaired or with any form of hearing impairment, those with limited English proficiency or anyone else that may struggle with accessing the current audio telephone message service. We anticipate that additional virtual, web and text-

based communications will be offered. The service will maintain it's regular check on participant's personal welfare and now for the first time be geared at more purposeful social engagement to reduce social isolation. This presents the opportunity for improved data collection related to the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing population.

- To support the goal of making all MDOA websites accessible in 2024–2025, the department hired a Digital Content Manager with extensive experience in accessibility and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). In collaboration with the Department of Information Technology (DoIT), MDOA has conducted accessibility scans of existing webpages and initiated corrections based on the findings. Additionally, all new projects undergo accessibility testing by DoIT experts, and MDOA actively participates in the Accessibility Community of Practice, led by Andrew Drummond.