

Testimony in Favor of SB 455 – Maryland Service Animal Program
Submitted by: Danielle LeClair, University Park, MD
Position: Support

Chairwoman Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and fellow Finance Committee members – Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify in favor of SB 455, which would establish the Maryland Children’s Service Animal Program in the Maryland Department of Health.

I want to also thank the bill’s lead sponsor, my state Senator Paul Pinsky, and the other sponsors of this bipartisan bill.

My 12 year old daughter and I live in University Park, MD. I adopted my daughter as a single parent almost three years ago from the foster care system. She is a smart and kind girl who has made Honor Roll almost every quarter, is a great athlete, plays the trombone in the school band, and loves animals, especially dogs.

She also has a number of significant mental health issues from the trauma she suffered in her birth and foster homes in the first 9 years of her life. What happened to her during those years which was in no way her fault. But she lives every day with the resulting trauma, and has challenging diagnoses including PTSD.

PTSD is an emotional and psychological – and often physical – reaction to trauma, including repeated childhood abuse. People with PTSD can have flashbacks triggered by a noise, emotion, memory, etc. The person with PTSD can then be brought back to the time of the trauma – i.e. abuse – and truly believe that they are in danger despite currently being safe. As a result, they can lose contact with reality and become violent, believing that they must defend themselves from actual harm despite being in a safe place, or they shut down and become immobile, aka the “freeze” response. Once the person with PTSD is re-regulated or no longer disassociated from their body, they often feel shame and guilt, and sometimes do not even remember their actions during a PTSD episode.

Treatment for PTSD in children – including trauma-focused therapy and neurofeedback - is extremely hard to find in Maryland. While my daughter has an excellent (albeit expensive) therapist and psychiatrist, trauma recovery is a long process and having help in my home in the form of a service dog when she has a PTSD episode would be hugely therapeutic to my daughter and I.

We have some experience with therapy horses so I’m glad that’s part of the bill as well. One of the best and most therapeutic forms of treatment my daughter has received is through the Prince George’s County Equestrian Therapy Program, or PETS. My daughter’s equine therapy last year improved her self-esteem – a key factor in kids who are survivors of abuse – and significantly reduced the duration and frequency of her PTSD episodes while she was riding. In fact, the 4 months she participated in equine therapy last Spring and Summer was the time since I’ve been her mom that my daughter had the fewest number of PTSD episodes.

Regarding the service dog component of the bill, one of the best and most direct and immediate forms of help for people with PTSD – including veterans and children with a history of abuse – is having a trained service dog. I understand that Maryland has already passed a similar law for veterans with PTSD to get better access to service dogs. I hope that you will do the same for children with PTSD in our state by passing SB 455 to help my daughter and many other children with PTSD get on the path to recovery.

Service dogs for people with PTSD are taught behaviors that help people better cope with their fear and anxiety. Service dogs receive specialized training and are protected by the ADA and other disability laws. They are different from therapy dogs and emotional support animals in a number of ways. Unlike therapy or emotional support dogs, service dogs are specially trained to provide a physical barrier between the person with PTSD and others around them during a PTSD episode, provide stress reducing pressure on trained body points, and provide comfort and social help as well. PTSD service dogs can also be trained to protect kids from self-harm, improve sleeping patterns, help wake the child for school, help with medication reminders, and help with public panic prevention. Importantly for my family, service dogs can be trained to alert the child's parent when the child is having a PTSD episode.

So you may ask: why we don't already have a service dog?

The answer is that the current wait to get a service dog is approximately 2 years, based on several service dog trainers that I have spoken to in Maryland and even out of state, as well as a number of service dog training websites.

And the cost to get a service dog is usually around \$20,000. I understand that this kind of specialized training is expensive and the cost is probably justified. I'd be happy to contribute financially to the service dog and fundraise, but my family and many other parents of kids with PTSD do not have, nor can they raise, \$20,000 to get a service dog.

Another challenge in getting a service dog on your own is protecting yourself from scammers. Psychology Today reported that there are a host of sketchy service dog registries, which will apparently fraudulently certify pet dogs as "service animals." While over 20 states now have laws criminalizing the misrepresentation of a dog as a service animal, with all the confusion, it's hard as a parent to know if a dog trainer is legitimate or just taking your money and scamming you. Having access to a service dog through the proposed Maryland Children's Service Animal program would ensure that my daughter and I are not the victims of scams and would instead be getting a properly trained PTSD service dog.

SB 455 will help my daughter by letting her be partnered with a service dog so that she can go from being a scared, sick child to become a healing survivor.

I hope that you will move quickly to a vote in favor of this important bill and to also support other legislation to help families struggling with mental health issues.

Thank you.