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DATE: February 6, 2020

BILL NUMBER: HB 311

POSITION: Support

The Office of the State's Attorney for Harford County (HCSAO) supports HB 311.

SB 101 provides for a Court Dog and Child Witness Program to be established on a voluntary basis in each Circuit Court in the State. The Administrative Office of the Courts is tasked with providing rules, procedures and a plan of implementation.

For many years Harford County has been utilizing dogs in therapeutic and support based roles in cases involving child victims. The Harford County Child Advocacy Center (CAC), an interdisciplinary team that investigates and responds to allegations of sexual child abuse and child exploitation comprised of the Harford County Sheriff's Office (HCSO), the HCSAO and the Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS), had utilized two dogs that served in this capacity. These dogs, Dizzy and Kilo were certified as therapy dogs in 2015 by PAWS for People, a nationally recognized dog therapy organization, following extensive training with a recertification process every two years. Dizzy's handler is an employee of DHS, while Kilo's handler is a Sheriff's Deputy and was purchased by the Harford County Sheriff's Office as an agency canine. Unfortunately, Kilo passed this last October and the Harford County Sheriff's Office is in the process of obtaining a new dog.

These dogs have been utilized countless times to comfort traumatized children and their families during the forensic interview process and trial preparation. Their presence has a powerful effect on vulnerable victims and have led to a greater ability to elicit forensic disclosures and impactful testimony. Additionally, Kilo engaged in community outreach and education around the State highlighting the importance of therapy dogs in child advocacy centers. These animals are an invaluable resource.

This legislation will undoubtedly facilitate the ability to reduce the traumatizing effects felt by child witnesses in the investigation and prosecution of child sex abuse and exploitation. Their presence in CAC and courthouse settings should be maximized.

For these reasons the HCSAO requests a favorable report on HB 311.