

Concerning House Bill 981  
**County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Certification and Use in Schools**

Submitted by National Capital Therapy Dogs  
(A Non-Profit Organization, Incorporated in the State of Maryland)

My name is Matt Nechin. I am a member of National Capital Therapy Dogs (NCTD). I thank the Members for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. NCTD has long thought that official recognition of and guidance for therapy dog organizations was needed.

We also feel that encouragement for animal-assisted therapy work should be given. It is especially important in our schools, where so many children at risk can be helped by the simple act of bringing a loving, neutral animal in to help them.

This bill is an important first step toward that goal.

We can actually SHOW animal assisted therapy at work IN THE SCHOOLS. We have brought two segments which were broadcast on television. They feature, in their real time settings, two of our dogs. One of them, Captain, is here today.

We have also brought submissions from some of the people who partner with their pets. Also, I have included a letter from Johns Hopkins University Hospital which gives an inside perspective about how therapy animals can help.

NCTD's position is that animal-assisted therapy in general and, more specifically, animal-assisted education—particularly in the format of school literacy support programs—is indispensable, should be allowed and encouraged, and MUST be regulated for appropriate standards and practices.

As I said, the proposed bill is only a beginning.

This is because the bill does not address a growing problem. Over the past few years, the legal definitions of a service animal, a therapy animal, and an emotional support or "comfort" animal have become blurred. It is therefore important that clear definitions of these terms be made and incorporated into later legislation, in accordance with already-established federal law. The definition in "Article – Education", (A) codifies the confusion. It makes no distinction between "comfort dogs" and trained, certified and insured therapy dogs.

Beyond providing affection and comfort, therapy animals offer controlled and goal-directed animal-assisted interventions.

Other states have begun to address the use of animal-assisted interventions. For example, the State of Utah is now considering HJR6, a Joint Resolution on the Benefits of Therapy Animals. NCTD feels that it does not go far enough, since it would be a resolution rather than a law. We do find that its definition of a therapy animal is a good one. We encourage the committee to incorporate that definition into future bills.

I have provided a copy of this proposed resolution and have also included, at the end of these remarks, the part of the resolution that contains the definition paragraphs.

Thank you for your work on, and support of, this important issue.

Definition of Therapy Dog  
Utah Proposed Joint Resolution HJR6

WHEREAS, a therapy animal is a domesticated animal that provides animal-assisted interventions to an individual with whom the therapy animal visits to assist the individual to achieve therapeutic gains and improved health and wellness;

WHEREAS, a therapy animal meets the accepted standards for client safety and animal welfare when the therapy animal has a handler and the therapy animal and handler are trained, tested, insured, evaluated on a regular basis, and registered by an organization that follows best practices for animal-assisted interventions;

WHEREAS, a therapy animal provides physical, psychological, and emotional benefits;

WHEREAS, a therapy animal has no special rights of access, except in a facility where the therapy animal is welcomed;

WHEREAS, therapy animals are currently welcomed, engaged with, promoted, and enlisted for interventions in Utah's schools, hospitals, senior residential facilities, domestic violence shelters, and juvenile courts; and

WHEREAS, Utahns of all backgrounds, ages, and needs have been helped by therapy animals, including patients in recovery, individuals with intellectual disabilities, seniors living with Alzheimer's, students with literacy challenges, veterans with PTSD, and those approaching end of life:

NOW, THEREFORE, . . .