

House Bill 186 - Court Dog Therapy Program- Veterans Treatment Courts  
House Judiciary Committee – January 28, 2021  
Testimony of Joyce Lombardi, Director of Government Relations  
Position: **SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS**

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Center for Hope (CFH) writes in support of HB186, which would expand the recently enacted child witness court dog law to allow veterans to be accompanied in certain court proceedings by a specifically trained dog. Passed in 2019, the court dog program guides Maryland courts on standards for “facility” and “therapy” dogs and handlers who support court proceedings with child witnesses. Both are terms of art and have different standards of training, use and certification. Thus CFH supports the proposed amendments on this bill, which seek simply to remove the misleading word “Therapy” from the suggested new title of the court dog program, i.e., “Court Dog ~~Therapy~~ Program”, as used on page 1, line 20 and page 2, line 19. All other uses of “therapy dog” throughout the current law would stay intact.

Center for Hope, a subsidiary of LifeBridge Health, helps clients and patients heal from acute violence such as child abuse, domestic violence, street violence and elder abuse through integrated, evidence-based programs that extend beyond hospital walls. We provide trauma-informed crisis intervention, forensic interviews, medical exams, mental health, wraparound case management, family advocacy and workforce development services.



Center for Hope’s children’s advocacy center features a highly trained service dog named **Manny**, a Zenlike black lab who has been a calming presence to numerous children and families engaging in the investigative process after disclosing, experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. Children and adults adore him. Manny is a carefully selected, well tended and highly trained “facility dog,” who went through over two years of training at Canine Companions for Independence, a national organization that trains service dogs for adults, children, and veterans, and trains facility dogs (like Manny) to work with

professionals in a visitation, education or healthcare setting. Manny is certified by Assistance Dogs International, which sets benchmarks to measure excellence in the assistance dog industry. Dogs like Manny – and their handlers – must pass specific tests and must conduct themselves with utmost safety, consistency and professionalism in a variety of public and private settings.

Maryland’s court dog law provides guidelines for standards for “facility dogs” like Manny, and for “therapy dogs,” which generally require less rigorous or lengthy training. Both types of dogs are recognized in Maryland courts under Maryland’s current court dog law.



Having witnessed the powerful soothing effect Manny has on children and adults, Center for Hope believes this same comfort should be provided to veterans in court proceedings.

We thank Delegate Malone and Senator Simonaire for helping to create more trauma-friendly courts. We urge a favorable report for HB186, with the sponsor amendments as noted.

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*LifeBridge Health is a regional health system comprising Sinai Hospital of Baltimore, Levindale Geriatric Center and Hospital in Baltimore; Northwest Hospital; Carroll Hospital and Grace Medical Center (formerly Bon Secours). At LifeBridge Health and Center for Hope, we are committed to convening national best practice and trauma experts to respond to violence, abuse and exploitation of our area's most vulnerable populations.*