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SB796: Maryland Disability Service Animal Program- Established
Sponsors: Senators Simonaire, King, Elfreth, and Carozza

Health and Government Operations Committee
1:00 PM, April 2, 2024

Position: Support

The Arc Maryland is a statewide disability advocacy organization that is dedicated to the preserving the rights, and improving the quality of life, of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

We are pleased to support SB796 which establishes the Maryland Disability Service Animal Program.

Over 61 million people in the United States are living with disabilities. **Less than one percent are teamed with service dogs.** Service dogs, specifically trained to perform disability-related tasks, have long been known to provide invaluable support and assistance to individuals with disabilities. These specially trained animals are not only loyal companions, but they enable their handlers to live, work, and attend school more independently and confidently in their daily lives.

Examples of the work of a service dog who has undergone extensive training to perform tasks for an individual with a disability include:

- Medical Alerts: Detect an oncoming seizure in a person with epilepsy or low blood glucose levels in Diabetics
- Mobility: Help a blind person navigate the community or perform tasks like pulling a wheelchair
- Hearing Alerts: Alert someone of certain sounds such as a ringing door bell
- Autism Support: Provide sensory stimulation & reduce anxiety

Assistance Dogs International (ADI), an organization that accredits service dog organizations in the United States, provides annual statistics on service dog teams from their accredited organizations. The amount of time to educate a service dog from an ADI-accredited organization is typically a minimum of 15 months. The cost of breeding, raising, training, and educating the individual who will be teamed with the service dog on how to work together, and ongoing lifetime support for the ADI-accredited service dog team can cost a family 10s of thousands of dollars. **Due to the costs involved, people with limited means (which includes many people with disabilities) are often shut out of the possibility of obtaining a service dog.** Those who have acceptable credit may be able to borrow from a bank to obtain the funds needed, but must pay these loans back from limited income. **This bill helps bridge the equity gap and improve access to service animals for those who would otherwise be unable to afford one.**

While there are some organizations that offer grants and scholarships to help individuals cover the costs and other organizations such as Canine Companions for Independence, Canines for Disabled Kids, and Assistance Dogs United, these resources are limited.

ⁱ In 2023, NIH- from the National Library of Medicine, performed a study on the benefits of being teamed with a service dog for individuals living with visible and invisible disabilities. 204 individuals teamed with a service dog met the inclusion criteria for the study.

The study showed overwhelmingly, respondents agreed or strongly agreed to **benefits of emotional connection (96%), community participation (97%), physical activity (96%), psychological wellbeing (98%), quality of life (97%), a reduction in prescribed medications (78%), and a decrease in paid or unpaid assistance hours (83%), which extend beyond their primary disability need.** It is clear that many others may benefit from being teamed with a service dog. Service dogs, when indicated, may benefit individuals living with disabilities by meeting primary and secondary needs that support independence. Service dogs are broadly helpful across all ages, genders, races, and ethnicities, and are equally beneficial for individuals living with mental–psychiatric and physical disabilities. **Given the history of service dogs and the benefits of those teamed with service dogs reported in this study, it is incumbent upon society to support its social contract with individuals with disabilities by making this proven support more readily available.**

ⁱⁱ Also a 2019 study, led by the Purdue University’s College of Veterinary Medicine, shows how **service dogs can have measurable positive effects on the health and wellbeing of individuals with physical disabilities.** The study, which was published in *Disability and Rehabilitation* and funded by Elanco, was led by Kerri Rodriguez and Maggie O’Haire from the Center for the Human-Animal Bond.

The study recruited 154 individuals from the databases of national service dog provider, Canine Assistants, to participate in a survey. A total of 97 individuals had a service dog from Canine Assistants while 57 were on a waiting list to receive one.

Rodriguez and O’Haire said the findings help shed light on how service dogs may impact their handler in ways that extend beyond what they are directly trained for. “Our findings are important because they empirically validate the numerous anecdotal reports from individuals with service dogs that say that these dogs really have an impact on their life,” Rodriguez said. The results indicated that compared to those on the waitlist, individuals with a service dog exhibited significantly better psychosocial health including higher social, emotional, and work/school functioning. And the findings suggest that service dogs may have measurable effects on specific aspects of psychosocial health for individuals with physical disabilities or chronic conditions.

The amendments adopted by the Senate change the definition of a person with a disability to conform to the Federal American's with Disabilities Act (ADA), and define the criteria by which a person may be found ineligible to participate in the program: if there is evidence to suggest the individual would be a **direct threat** to others or a service animal, as defined by the ADA. These amendments as incorporated are important to The Arc Maryland.

The Arc Maryland urges a favorable report on SB796.

For more information, please contact Ande Kolp, Executive Director akolp@thearcmd.org

ⁱ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10670951/#B3-healthcare-11-02987>

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ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/releases/2019/Q1/service-dogs-benefit-the%20well-being-of-their-handlers,-research-shows.html>

