

I am writing to advocate for SB 157, the Maryland Blind and Deaf Service Animal Program, on behalf of Dogs for Better Lives (DBL). DBL is committed to enhancing the lives of individuals through the placement of highly trained Service Dogs, and we firmly believe that SB 157 is instrumental in expanding funding and accessibility for members of the deaf and hard of hearing community.

An increase in the available funding for these transformative Hearing Service Dogs will greatly augment DBL's ability to train and place more hearing dogs in Maryland. Testimonials from our Maryland-based clients, like the one below, underscore the invaluable independence and safety these dogs provide:

“I felt even more drawn to a Hearing Service Dog after I went from being hard of hearing to complete and sudden deafness a few years back. It was incredibly scary, and I knew I needed a backup in case I lost my hearing or went deaf again. After a lot of research, I applied through Dogs for Better lives. My Hearing Dog Jamie has added a strong sense of reassurance and heightened awareness in my life. He is always in tune with his surroundings and never fails to let me know when there are important sounds.”

In Maryland, we see a significant demand for Hearing Service Dogs. DBL has several individuals from Maryland currently on our organization's waitlist and multiple active Hearing Dog Teams.

As the oldest provider of professionally trained Hearing Service Dogs in the United States, we have placed upwards of 1,700 dogs nationally since 1977. Today, our Hearing Dog program currently has nearly two dozen deserving individuals on our wait list. The high demand for Hearing Service Dogs means that there are wait times up to 3 years to receive a dog. This means a significant portion of individuals in Maryland and across the nation who need Hearing Service Dogs for safety and independence do not have access to them. Increased funding can help close that time gap and allow for more Hearing Service Dogs to be placed each year.

Hearing Service Dogs are trained to alert to specific household sounds by making physical contact (jumping on you or nosing their handler) then leading the handler to the sound. Core household sounds include the smoke alarm, oven timer, name call, baby cry, door knock, phone, and alarm clock. We also train the dogs to alert to sounds in public and provide additional training to clients for personalized alerts.

The investment into a future Service Dog is significant. It takes approximately 6 months to professionally train a Hearing Service Dog, and that time is even longer for purpose-bred dogs who live with Puppy Raisers until they are 14 months of age. In addition to the funding and time required to train and place a Hearing Service Dog, one must not overlook the lifetime commitment involved. DBL provides ongoing support and client follow-ups throughout the life of the team to ensure the Hearing Service Dogs are meeting each individual client's needs.

Studies such as the 2021 PEDRO study conducted in the UK have demonstrated that recipients of Hearing Service Dogs experience increased wellbeing and reduced dependency on others, along with decreased feelings of isolation and fear both at home and in public.

Establishing the Maryland Blind and Deaf Service Animal Program has the potential to significantly enhance the quality of life for deaf or hard-of-hearing adults, providing them not only with companionship but also with essential independence and safety measures.

In conclusion, we urge the Health and Governance Committee to support this crucial initiative during the upcoming hearing on April 2. SB 157 will expand access and funding for Hearing Service Dogs, enabling more individuals in Maryland to benefit from these life-changing dogs.