



SB 101 - Courts - Court Dog and Child Witness Program
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee – January 9, 2020
Position: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

Baltimore Child Abuse Center (BCAC), Maryland’s first accredited children’s advocacy center, supports Senate Bill 101, which will allow a child victim or witness to be accompanied by a facility dog or therapy dog whom has proper training and is teamed with a certified dog handler. The court process is often re-traumatizing for children. Expanding the Court Dog and Child Witness Protection Program can help support children by allowing trained dogs that can provide a calming influence.

BCAC, now a subsidiary of Lifebridge Health (LBH) and part of LBH’s new comprehensive violence center, is a chartered, accredited member of the National Children’s Alliance and the Maryland Children’s Alliance. BCAC provides victims of child trauma with forensic interviews, medical treatment, family advocacy, and referrals for mental health services in a supportive and child-friendly setting with a goal of preventing future abuse. BCAC has served over 35,000 young people and their non-offending caregivers since inception.

BCAC’s facility dog, Manny, was hired August of 2017, after he was trained by Canine Companions for Independence (CCI). He first was placed with a specially trained puppy raiser for 18 months, then went to a CCI training facility in New York for six months of advanced training. Manny was matched with Kerry Hannan, BCAC’s Director of Forensic Services. Ms. Hannan then attended a 2-week training to learn how to give him all of his 40+ commands. BCAC is required to keep up Manny’s Assistance Dogs International (ADI) certification, which requires, among other things, passing tests in public spaces. Manny is a highly skilled working dog and an important member of our team.

Manny has assisted dozens of children in forensic interviews, therapy sessions, and medical exams, and has helped provide a calming presence to numerous families in the waiting room and during crises. While Manny is a legally neutral companion, he tends to provide calm emotional support to young clients when recounting their traumatic experiences.

With this bill, Maryland would have the opportunity to join other states that have passed legislation promoting trained assistance dogs to children in legal settings. We support this bill with language that further clarifies the training needed for facility dogs (like Manny) and therapy dogs (which generally receive less training). For example, we suggest amending the definition of “therapy dog” on page 3, by adding, after line 10 the following language, making it more similar to the facility dog definition:

Page 3 line 10 (III) (A) GRADUATED FROM AN ORGANIZATION THAT INSURES,
REGISTERS, OR CERTIFIES ASSISTANCE DOGS AND THEIR HANDLERS; OR
(B) (1) HAS BEEN PERFORMING ITS DUTIES FOR NOT LESS THAN TWO YEARS;
(2) HAS PASSED A PUBLIC ACCESS TEST FOR SERVICE DOGS; AND

(3) HAS BEEN SPECIALLY TRAINED TO PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TO WITNESSES TESTIFYING IN JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS WITHOUT CAUSING A DISTRACTION DURING THE PROCEEDINGS

We understand that all court proceedings, not just trial, can be stressful for child witnesses. Thus we also suggest explicitly widening the scope of settings in which dogs are allowed such as:

In line 3, page 4, add:

(I) PROCEEDINGS UNDER THIS SUBTITLE INCLUDE ANY INTERACTIONS WITH COURT MATTERS OR COURT PERSONNEL, INCLUDING IN CAMERA REVIEWS, MEETINGS WITH ATTORNEYS, JUDGES, MAGISTRATES, BEST INTEREST ATTORNEYS, PRIVILEGE ATTORNEYS, CINA ATTORNEYS, AND/OR CUSTODY EVALUATORS.

We urge a favorable report for SB101, with amendments.

Joyce Lombardi, Director of Government Relations
Baltimore Child Abuse Center
Lifebridge Health
2300 North Charles Street
Baltimore MD 21218
(443) 923-7005