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March 4, 2020

State Delegate Michelle Guyton
Annapolis, MD

Dear Delegate Guyton,

I write you to express support for HB 981, to require county school districts to allow therapy dogs in schools. It is my understanding after reading the draft bill with your chief of staff, Lisa, that the intent is to prevent individual school administrators from blocking therapy dog services to students, while at the same time not over-legislating, requiring each school district to draft their own policy on therapy dog team requirements for their member schools.

As an active duty Maryland volunteer therapy dog handler myself for the past 10 years, I have personally seen children's reading levels, socio-emotional wellness and behaviors improve during and after their therapy dog visits.

As the organizer for Pet Partners of Maryland, I get to interface with many therapy dogs teams, as we locally connect facilities such as schools with therapy dogs teams in Maryland registered and evaluated through the largest and oldest therapy animal organization in the nation, Pet Partners.

As a Montgomery County, Maryland resident, I am aware that local organizations such as Caring Canines and National Capital Therapy Dogs train and evaluate volunteer therapy dog teams for Maryland residents as well. When I checked, there are close to 400 therapy dog teams working in Maryland from JUST Pet Partners and these two local organizations. Many of these therapy dog teams are already in schools providing animal-assisted interactions. My two canine partners alone have made more than 300 visits with more than 500 children in educational settings in the past three years. So, as long as the bill says "therapy dog", and not service dog, assistance dog, or facility dog, it will not legislatively exclude the great work currently being accomplished by therapy dog teams in Maryland schools.

The level of gratitude and support children, teachers, counselors and school staff express for therapy dogs is overwhelmingly positive. As I write this, I am looking at a pile of (literally) hundreds of thank you notes written by school children for their therapy dog experiences. I have included an image for you on the second page of this letter.

Sincerely yours,

Holly Solano,
Human partner to Vega, Nala, and Mouse
Organization Leader, Pet Partners of Maryland



