

Senator William C. Smith, Jr.
Chair, Judicial Proceedings Committee
Miller Senate Office Building
11 Bladen St.
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

January 27, 2024

RE: SB 42 – Vehicle Laws – Horse Riding – Helmet Requirement for Minors

Dear Chair Smith, Vice-Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Rachel Neff and I am the Executive Director of Promise Landing Farm, a member of the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, International (PATH Intl), and Chair of the Maryland Horse Council's Equine-Assisted Services committee. In my role as Chair, I work with equine professionals across the state who are helping people with physical, mental, emotional, and learning disabilities through riding and other interactions with horses. We estimate that approximately 2500 Maryland children benefit from these services each year, and many programs offering these services are at capacity and have a waiting list.¹ According to the Maryland State Department of Education, about 12% of Maryland students – more than 100,000 children -- are identified as students with disabilities.²

Horseback riding, as with many sports, carries a risk of traumatic brain injury (TBI) caused by falling from or being struck by a horse. Correct use of ASTM-SEI certified riding helmets can reduce that risk of brain injury by 40-50%. Given the lasting impacts of TBI on a person's health and wellness, and the ripple effects on their family and community, wearing a certified riding helmet is an easy way to mitigate risk.

Most of my colleagues are deeply safety-conscious and already require that their students wear helmets when riding. However, Maryland has no licensing requirements for riding instructors and unsafe programs do exist. As in any high-demand, largely unregulated industry, there is a real risk that families, particularly those who are new to horses, will be unable to recognize the safety risks and won't know to ask about helmets -- or anything else.

I was one of these children. My well-intentioned, safety-aware parents knew nothing about horses when I started taking riding lessons, which meant they didn't see the red flags at my first lesson barn, one of which was that helmets were not required or encouraged. I got lucky and a distant relative explained the importance of riding helmets to my parents fairly early on, but I could just as easily have been part of a statistic about TBI in horseback riding.

I am pleased to write today in strong support of Senate Bill 42 – Helmet Requirement for Minors -- which protects all children, including those in adaptive or therapeutic riding lessons. I also strongly support the amendment, which makes it clear that the law also covers physical, occupational, and speech therapy that takes place on horseback, while providing an exception for the very small number of children receiving these medical treatments who require alternative helmet use for medical purposes. The PATH

Intl Guidelines for Alternative Helmet Use, which are widely accepted in the industry, even among those who are not PATH Intl members, are enclosed.

I hope you will support SB 42. If you would like to discuss any of this information further, please feel free to contact me at rachel@promiselandingfarm.com or 317-809-5094.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rachel Neff". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rachel Neff
Executive Director, Promise Landing Farm
Chair, Equine-Assisted Services Committee, Maryland Horse Council

¹Estimates based on information provided by the Maryland Horse Industry Board and the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, International.

²Maryland State Department of Education, 2023, *Deep Dive: Students with Disabilities, Part 2*, <https://marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/2023/0228/DeepDiveStudentsWithDisabilitiesPart2.pdf>. Accessed 27 Jan. 2024.

Helmet Use

The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International mandatory standard *A30 requires all participants to wear protective headgear that is American Society for Testing and Materials – Safety Equipment Institute (ASTM-SEI) certified for equestrian use while mounted or driving. Every attempt must be made to use an ASTM-SEI certified helmet for equestrian activities. Information regarding helmets can be obtained from SEI at www.SEInet.org (headgear, equestrian helmet).

Guidelines for Alternative Helmet Use

Alternative helmets (helmets not ASTM-SEI approved for equestrian activities) may be acceptable under very specific circumstances, which may include:

- very small or very large head size
- extreme asymmetries in head shape
- significantly poor head control
- alternative riding positions for very physically dependent riders
- very significant sensory integrative dysfunction

If the use of an ASTM-SEI equestrian helmet has been tried and is not appropriate, then a Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) approved helmet for bicycle riding or an ASTM-SEI approved helmet for other sports may be considered if it provides adequate coverage over the back of the head. In extreme circumstances, when no ASTM-SEI or CPSC certified helmet is adequate, a non-ASTM-SEI or CPSC helmet may be considered. These helmets can be made of rigid or soft flexible foam and usually are found in therapeutic equipment catalogs, custom made or available for other sports. Because they are not standardized or tested for sport impact or equestrian activities, they are to be used only with extreme caution.

PATH Intl. Centers may consider alternative helmets according to the following guidelines:

- Participants who use alternative helmets (helmets not ASTM-SEI approved for equestrian activities) **MUST** have a written evaluation/justification by an appropriate licensed/credentialed health professional (PT, OT, SLP or MD) that specifically addresses the risk of equine activities to determine whether the use of this helmet is necessary **AND** to recommend which type to use.
- A non-ASTM-SEI approved helmet may be used **ONLY** when there are a leader and two sidewalkers with the participant as minimum safety requirements.
- The equine-assisted services must be confined to an enclosed and safe arena.
- The equine-assisted services must be directly supervised by an occupational or physical therapist or a speech-language pathologist.
- There are no state or local laws requiring ASTM helmet use.