

HB 563 - Criminal Law - Emergency Response Animal - Prohibited Actions Against

Position: Support

Committee: House Judiciary Committee

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From: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Department of General Services (DGS) and Maryland Capitol Police (MCP) strongly support House Bill 563, which establishes critical protection for emergency response animals engaged in lawful public safety operations throughout the State of Maryland.

Emergency response animals are integral members of modern law enforcement. Within MCP, Explosive Detection K9 teams perform essential preventative and response-based missions that safeguard state government facilities, employees, elected officials, and the public. These K9 teams conduct daily protective sweeps, respond to bomb threats and unattended packages, assist allied law enforcement agencies statewide, and support large-scale public events across Maryland.

The effectiveness of these teams is measured not only by interdictions but by deterrence. The visible presence of trained explosive detection K9s significantly reduces risk and enhances public confidence. These operations are conducted in close proximity to the public, often in crowded or unsecured environments, where intentional interference or harm poses an immediate threat to officer safety and mission integrity.

House Bill 563 appropriately recognizes that:

- Emergency response animals operate under the direct control of trained and certified law enforcement handlers;
- These animals are actively engaged in hazardous duties that place them at elevated risk; and
- Interfering with or harming an emergency response animal directly compromises law enforcement operations and endangers human life.

By clearly defining “emergency response animal” and establishing graduated criminal penalties for harassment, interference, injury, or killing of these animals - particularly when such acts occur during the commission of a crime - House Bill 563 provides law enforcement with an essential statutory safeguard. The bill reinforces accountability while preserving judicial discretion through proportional sentencing.

MCP invests substantial time, training, and resources into the selection, certification, and ongoing readiness of its K9 teams. These animals are not replaceable assets; they are highly specialized partners whose loss or injury has immediate operational, financial, and public safety consequences.

House Bill 563 affirms Maryland's commitment to protecting the full spectrum of those who serve on the front lines of public safety. MCP believes this legislation will strengthen operational security, deter interference with active law enforcement missions, and reinforce the seriousness of crimes committed against emergency response animals.

For these reasons, the Department of General Services and Maryland Capitol Police request a favorable report on House Bill 563.

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