

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 37

(Senator Simonaire)

Finance

Maryland Service Animal Programs - Participant Disqualification - Revisions

This bill defines a “direct threat” for the purposes of disqualifying a program participant from participating in the Maryland Children’s Service Animal Program or the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program. The bill aligns the circumstances under which a nonprofit training program may disqualify a program participant for both programs.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: None. The change is technical in nature and does not directly affect governmental finances.

Local Effect: None.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Bill Summary: A nonprofit training entity may disqualify a program participant from participation in the Maryland Children’s Service Animal Program or the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program if the nonprofit training entity determines that the program participant’s involvement in the program:

- presents a danger to the program participant’s mental or physical well-being;
- presents a direct threat to others;
- presents a direct threat to the mental or physical well-being of the service dog, support dog, or therapy horse; or

- does not meet the training requirements of the nonprofit training entity.

Current Law: Pursuant to the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, “direct threat” means a significant risk to the health or safety of others that cannot be eliminated by reasonable accommodation.

Maryland Children’s Service Animal Program

Chapters 247 and 248 of 2020 established the Maryland Children’s Service Animal Program and associated fund in the Maryland Department of Health to refer eligible children to selected nonprofit entities to be paired with service or support animals or interact with therapy horses and facilitate their training or therapy.

A nonprofit training entity may disqualify a program participant from the program if it determines that the participant’s involvement in the program (1) presents a danger to the participant’s mental or physical well-being; (2) is a direct threat to the health and safety of others; (3) presents a direct threat to the mental or physical well-being of the service dog, support dog, or therapy horse; or (4) does not meet the training requirements of the nonprofit training entity.

Since its inception in 2020 through fiscal 2026, the Maryland Children’s Service Animal Program has not been allocated funding in the State budget.

Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program

Chapter 416 of 2017 established the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program and Fund. The program is designed to refer eligible veterans to selected nonprofit training organizations to be paired with “service dogs” or “support dogs” and facilitate their training. The Department of Veterans and Military Families must select at least one nonprofit training entity that meets specified qualifications to carry out elements of the program. Chapter 465 of 2019 expanded the program to include nonprofit training entities that use trained therapy horses for interaction with veterans. Chapter 268 of 2025 expanded eligibility for the program to include an “eligible family member” (a spouse or dependent of an eligible veteran).

A nonprofit training entity may disqualify a program participant if it determines that the participant’s involvement in the program (1) presents a danger to the program participant’s mental or physical well-being; (2) has caused or may potentially cause harm to others, an animal, or property; (3) presents a danger to the service dog’s, support dog’s, or therapy horse’s mental or physical well-being; or (4) does not meet the training requirements of the nonprofit.

The fiscal 2026 budget includes \$211,930 in general funds for the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program.

Maryland Disability Service Animal Program

Chapters 6 and 13 of the 2025 Special Session established the Maryland Disability Service Animal Program in the Maryland Department of Disabilities to select at least one nonprofit training entity to pair eligible individuals with an appropriate service animal.

A nonprofit training entity may disqualify a program participant if it determines that the participant's involvement in the program (1) presents a danger to the program participant's mental or physical well-being; (2) presents a direct threat to others, as defined by the federal Americans with Disabilities Act; (3) presents a direct threat to the service animal's mental or physical well-being; and (4) does not meet the training requirements of the nonprofit.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Department of Veterans and Military Families; Department of Legislative Services

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jg/jc

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