



House Bill 311 - Courts - Court Dog and Child Witness Program
Established House Judicial Proceedings Committee

February 5, 2020

Position: SUPPORT AS AMENDED

Baltimore Child Abuse Center (BCAC), Maryland's first accredited children's advocacy center, supports House Bill 311, 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.

We support sponsor amendments to increase training requirements for therapy dogs, who generally do not receive as much training as facility dogs. Unlike therapy dogs, facility dogs go through at least 2 years of training and must pass rigorous tests about how to behave in busy public places and are taught to interact with a variety of people and stimuli, not just provide comfort to one person.

We urge a favorable report for HB 311 as amended.

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