

**HB-660 - Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program - Definitions
Maryland Horse Council, FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENT**

Hearing before the House Health & Government Operations Committee,
March 3, 2021

The Maryland Horse Council (MHC) is a membership-based, umbrella trade association of the entire horse industry in Maryland. Our membership includes horse farms and stables (including those that provide equine assisted therapy and services to veterans), horse-related businesses, and horse owners, representing all facets of the Maryland equestrian community, from the owners of race horses to the owners of trail horses or just beloved retired companion horses. As such, we represent over 30,000 Marylanders.

MHC supports the laudable goal of ensuring the safety and welfare of veterans enrolled in equine assisted learning and therapy programs, and of the horses who serve them, as well as the goal of making these proven beneficial services available to the greatest number of veterans. However, we believe that the definition of “therapy horse” as included in HB 660 is too restrictive, and therefore does not advance those goals.

HB 660 provides:

“THERAPY HORSE” INCLUDES A HORSE DETERMINED APPROPRIATE FOR INTERACTIONS WITH VETERANS BY A STABLE LICENSED BY THE STATE THAT:

(I) IS A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION OF THERAPEUTIC HORSEMANSHIP, INTERNATIONAL (PATH, INTL.) PREMIER ACCREDITED MEMBER CENTER; OR

(II) HAS EQUINE ASSISTED GROWTH AND LEARNING ASSOCIATION (EAGALA) CERTIFIED PROFESSIONALS WHO PROVIDE SERVICES TO VETERANS.



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The bill, in essence, requires that each local, nonprofit, equine therapy program and/or its own instructors and trainers go through the process of becoming officially certified by PATH or EAGALA (and in the case of PATH, that the facility meet the even higher bar of becoming a Premier Accredited Member Center). We understand that such processes can be lengthy and very expensive - potentially beyond the reach of many local programs that have operated for years with great track records of safety and success.

We note that the definitions of service and support dogs in the bill do not require such certifications by third party organizations.

MHC has consulted a group of Maryland providers of equine services to veterans about the proposed definition. The group generally felt that the definition in the bill is too narrow, and would exclude a number of well-established programs in the state. For example, as we have been advised, there are only 8 PATH Premiere Accredited Member Centers in Maryland. Apparently, only 3 of those currently provide programs for veterans. Therefore, we believe that the alternative definition, below, will better ensure that these important services are available to the greatest number of veterans, as close to their homes as possible, while at the same time ensuring that only the highest quality programs are delivered.

We suggest this wording:

“THERAPY HORSE” INCLUDES A HORSE DETERMINED APPROPRIATE FOR INTERACTIONS WITH VETERANS BY A STABLE LICENSED BY THE STATE THAT:

(I) IS INDIVIDUALLY TRAINED TO DO WORK OR PERFORM TASKS FOR THE BENEFIT OF AN INDIVIDUAL WITH A DISABILITY, INCLUDING PHYSICAL, SENSORY, PSYCHIATRIC, INTELLECTUAL, OR OTHER MENTAL DISABILITY; OR

(II) SERVES AS AN EMOTIONAL SUPPORT OR THERAPY ANIMAL THAT A MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL, WITHIN THE MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL'S SCOPE OF PRACTICE, HAS DETERMINED PROVIDES BENEFIT FOR AN INDIVIDUAL WITH A SENSORY, PSYCHIATRIC, INTELLECTUAL, OR OTHER MENTAL DISABILITY.

The suggested definitional language mirrors the language used for "service dog" and "support dog" already in the bill. This definition ensures that the horses are acceptable according to professionally recognized standards, without imposing undue financial burden on some of the smaller but still very worthy nonprofits providing equine therapy to veterans.

We urge the Committee to amend the bill according to our suggestions, and report it favorably.

Respectfully submitted,

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Chair, Government Relations Committee



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