

**Senate Bill 7 Courts – Court Dog Therapy Program – Veterans Treatment Courts**

Judicial Proceedings Committee

January 26, 2021

**Position: SUPPORT**

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health, mental illness and substance use. We appreciate this opportunity to present testimony in support of Senate Bill 7.

SB 7 expands the Court Dog and Child Witness Program to provide therapy dogs for individuals in Veterans Treatment Court.

Across a variety of studies, dogs have shown to help lower blood pressure in response to stress tests/tasks, reduce anxiety in children, and can be trained to assist owners diagnosed with PTSD, schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder.<sup>1</sup> By providing therapy dogs, veterans can feel more comfortable during proceedings.

Expanding the Court Dog and Child Witness Program will provide further resources to veterans who have suffered significant trauma and experience worsened anxiety in the courtroom. Veterans Treatment Courts throughout the United States have begun similar programs, including Baltimore City, MD. The Honorable Judge Halee Weinstein of Baltimore City has partnered the Veterans Treatment Court with the Warrior Canine Connection, which allows veterans to have a dog with them in the courtroom during each docket as comfort, and allows them to train therapy and service dogs to eventually be matched with another veteran.<sup>2</sup>

Veterans Treatment Courts have been used to help more than 10,000 veterans diagnosed with mental health and substance use disorders facing legal concerns, and this number is only growing.<sup>3</sup> The opportunity to provide comfort in the courtroom to a population that has faced significant trauma in serving their country cannot be passed by. For these reasons, MHAMD supports SB 7 and urges a favorable report.

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<sup>1</sup>Ehrenfeld, T. (2019, October 7). Your dog can help your anxiety. *Psychology Today*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/open-gently/201910/your-dog-can-help-your-anxiety>

<sup>2</sup>Maryland Courts. (2018, November 13). *Baltimore City Veterans Treatment Court celebrates graduates, three-year anniversary*. [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.mdcourts.gov/media/news/2018/pr20181113>

<sup>3</sup>Warrior Canine Connection. (n.d.). *Warrior Canine Connection launches program in Baltimore City Veterans Treatment Court*. [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://warriorcanineconnection.org/press-releases/warrior-canine-connection-launches-program-in-baltimore-city-veterans-treatment-court/>

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