



Testimony of The Seeing Eye, Inc.
Before the
Judicial Proceedings Committee of the Maryland Senate
Regarding Senate Bill 607 Criminal Law- Harm to Service Animals -- Support
February 15, 2021

My name is Melissa Allman and I am the Advocacy & Government Relations Specialist at The Seeing Eye, Inc. in Morristown, New Jersey. I appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony for the hearing record on an issue that is of paramount importance when it comes to the safety of people who are blind and visually impaired working with guide dogs throughout Maryland.

The Seeing Eye was established in 1929 and is the world's oldest guide dog school. We are a charitable, nonprofit organization and our mission is to enhance the independence, dignity and self-confidence of people who are blind and visually impaired through the use of specially bred and trained Seeing Eye® dogs. Currently across North America, there are in active service more than 1700 partnerships between our blind and visually impaired graduates and their Seeing Eye dogs.

The Seeing Eye is a staunch advocate for state laws that criminalize harm to service animals and their handlers and provide remedies for victims of such harm. We have been instrumental in supporting efforts to create or strengthen several such laws in our home state of New Jersey as well as in other states.

Interference and attacks on guide dog teams can leave blind and visually impaired handlers stranded in dangerous situations and sometimes instantly end partnerships that foster daily independence and dignity. The Seeing Eye therefore applauds the efforts of the Maryland legislators who have shown their commitment to this issue by introducing SB607 and its companion bill HB234 and we support the bills.

SB607 and its companion bill are closely modeled on New Jersey's service animal protection statute, codified as 2C:29-3.2, and commonly known as Dusty's Law. IN 2010, a New Jersey volunteer puppy raiser for The Seeing Eye and Dusty, the German shepherd puppy he was raising, were viciously attacked by an uncontrolled loose dog in their neighborhood. Both the puppy raiser and Dusty were severely injured and Dusty was unable to undergo training to become a working guide.

In 2011, The Seeing Eye conducted a survey of guide dog handlers in the United States and Canada to gather information about their experiences with attacks and interference from aggressive dogs. Eighty-three percent of U.S. survey respondents reported they had experienced some type of aggressive interference by a dog and 44% had experienced a physical attack on

their guide dog. Fifty-eight percent even had their dog attacked more than once. Most of the encounters happened on a public sidewalk or right of way. More recent data collected by The Seeing Eye indicates that aggressive interference is still a serious threat to guide dog teams across North America. Strong legislation to protect service animal handlers in every state, and enforcement of that legislation, is what it will take to combat this problem.

The Seeing Eye used the 2011 survey results to raise public awareness and to educate legislators about the serious risks posed to guide dog teams by attack and interference. Volunteers and friends of The seeing Eye tirelessly lobbied for legislation to protect service animals and their handlers. As a result, Dusty's Law was passed in 2014. If Maryland passes SB607, it could become the forty-eighth state to enact a service animal protection law and join New Jersey in having one of the strongest such laws in the nation.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony for the public record and, respectfully, we strongly urge passage of this essential legislation to promote guide dog teams working safely and without interference throughout Maryland. Please do not hesitate to contact The Seeing Eye if you have any questions about this testimony.

Respectfully,

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