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Judiciary Committee



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

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The Honorable Delegate Luke Clippinger
Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee
6 Bladen Street, Room 101
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Good Afternoon, Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Atterbeary and members of this wonderful committee. I am Delegate Williams and I am testifying in **favor** of **HB 234**, also known as **Criminal Law - Harm to Service Animals**.

For many in our community, service animals allow for them to lead independent lives, minimizing the impacts associated with physical, intellectual, or other disabilities. Ninety percent (90%) of those who are blind in the United States are unemployed and rely on some form of government assistance. While only three percent (3%) of blind individuals use a service dog, ninety percent (90%) of those who use a service dog are employed. While some may view these animals as just being a companion or pet, those with service animals enjoy immense benefits from their capabilities.

However, service animals are not cheap. The average cost to purchase a seeing eye dog is between Sixty Thousand Dollars (\$60,000.00) to One Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$100,000.00). A friend of mine who uses a service animal to assist her because of her hearing disability paid

\$10,000.00 for her first service dog. Yet, the value that they bring to the owner is invaluable such as assisting with picking things up, opening doors, guiding people who are blind, alerting people who are deaf or pulling a wheelchair, breaking down barriers in the process.

It is past time that members of our community are able to enjoy the use of a service animal without the constant fear or worry that their animal might be injured or interfered with. While we currently have such laws on our books such as Section 6-301 - Malicious Destruction of Property which is a misdemeanor and carries a penalty for property valued at \$1000.00 or greater up to 3 years in prison and/or a fine of \$2500.00, this bill will not only establish stronger repercussions and/or a \$5,000 fine for anyone found guilty of causing intentional harm to a service animal, this bill will also allow the court to enter an order for the defendant to pay restitution to the owner of the harmed animal that will cover the cost to cover veterinarian expenses or worse, replacement of the animal. It is important that we, as a legislature, recognize that there is a large amount of training and cost invested in service animals and that they are beyond worthy of being protected under the law.

I believe this bill will go a long way towards reaffirming the legislature's support for disabled Marylanders. I am urging a favorable vote on House Bill 234.

I am happy to take questions.

Sincerely,

Delegate Nicole A. Williams, Esq.