

SB409 - County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Policy for Handling and Use in Schools
Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee– February 11, 2021
Testimony of Joyce Lombardi, Director of Government Relations
Position: **SUPPORT SPONSOR AMENDMENTS**

Center for Hope (CFH) writes in support of SB409, which would require county boards of education to allow the use of “therapy” dogs in public schools. It is our understanding that the sponsor is amending the bill to include the use of “facility” dogs as well. Center for Hope supports those amendments.



Center for Hope, a subsidiary of LifeBridge Health, helps clients and patients heal from acute violence such as child abuse, domestic violence, street violence and elder abuse through integrated, evidence-based programs that extend beyond hospital walls. We provide trauma-informed crisis intervention, forensic interviews, medical exams, mental health, wraparound case management, family advocacy and workforce development services.

FACILITY AND THERAPY DOGS. “Therapy dogs” and “facility dogs” are terms of art across the nation, and have different standards of training, use and certification. Generally, “facility dogs” (like Manny, above) are specially trained dogs that are appropriate for all people and encounters in institutional settings such as schools and children’s advocacy centers. Generally, therapy dogs are trained to provide emotional support to one specific person. Generally, facility dogs have more training. Both types of dogs are recognized under Maryland law. Passed in 2019, the court dog program guides Maryland courts on standards for “facility” and “therapy” dogs and handlers who support court proceedings with child witnesses. Those definitions are the result of input by many Maryland stakeholders and are enshrined in Md Code, Cts and Judicial Proceedings Art. §9-501.

Center for Hope’s children’s advocacy center features a highly trained service dog named **Manny**, pictured above, a Zenlike black lab who been who has been calming presence to numerous children and families engaging in the investigative process after disclosing, experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. Children and adults adore him. Manny is a carefully selected, well tended and highly trained “facility dog,” who went through over two years of training at Canine Companions for Independence, a national organization that trains service dogs for adults, children, and veterans, and trains facility dogs (like Manny) to work with professionals in a visitation, education or healthcare setting. Just over half of the dogs graduate from Canine Companions- most lack the temperament to be Manny. CCI is certified by Assistance Dogs International, which sets benchmarks to measure excellence in the assistance dog industry. Dogs like Manny – and their handlers – must pass specific tests and must conduct themselves with utmost safety, consistency and professionalism in a variety of public and private settings.



Thus Center for Hope supports the proposed sponsor amendments that would, for example, allow the “USE OF **FACILITY OR THERAPY DOGS**” in all places in the bill where “therapy dogs” are mentioned, and also use the **MEANINGS IN CTS AND JUD. PROC. ART. §9-501, which define both terms therapy and facility dog for use in court proceedings.**

Having witnessed the powerful soothing effect Manny has on children and adults, Center for Hope believes this same comfort should be provided to students who welcome dogs (and who are not afraid or allergic), under the same guidelines governing their use in Maryland courts.

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LifeBridge Health is a regional health system comprising Sinai Hospital of Baltimore, Levindale Geriatric Center and Hospital in Baltimore; Northwest Hospital; Carroll Hospital and Grace Medical Center (formerly Bon Secours). At LifeBridge Health and Center for Hope, we are committed to convening national best practice and trauma experts to respond to violence, abuse and exploitation of our area’s most vulnerable populations.