



**SB 535: Human Relations – Housing Discrimination – Service Dogs**

March 28, 2023

Position: Support IF Amended

Testimony of Maryland Centers for Independent Living

The seven Centers for Independent Living (CIL) were established by federal law and work to ensure the civil rights and quality services of people with disabilities in Maryland. Centers for Independent Living are nonprofit disability resource and advocacy organizations located throughout Maryland operated by and for people with disabilities. CIL staff and Boards are at least 51% people with disabilities. We are part of a nationwide network which provides Information and Referral, Advocacy, Peer Support, Independent Living Skills training, and Transition Services.

Assistance animals should be celebrated as one method by which people with disabilities achieve greater independence. Those of us who use wheelchairs or have mobility limits may use an assistance animal to retrieve dropped items or medications, or open doors. Some assistance animals are able to notice physical changes in our bodies and can warn of seizures or panic attacks or low blood sugar. Some help calm and enable persons for example, with PTSD, navigate a drug store or grocery store or other social environment.

The federal Fair Housing Amendment Act, one of our nation’s premier civil rights laws, prohibits discrimination of persons with disabilities in the sale, rental or marketing of housing. The law requires accommodation of assistance animals for persons with disabilities. We understand the positive impact of SB 535 and believe it will best accomplish its goals by conforming the language, which currently references “service dogs” to the broader term “assistance animal” as used in our federal law.

We thank the bill sponsor and supporters for making clear that the protections extend to those impacted individuals and animals when the animal may have aged and is less able to aid those they have served. The bill provides a humane extension of our rights. However, we also ask that the bill not be limited solely those who are blind, low vision or Deaf or hard of hearing. The rights should attach to any qualified person with a disability who demonstrates the need for an assistance animal, as per our federal law.

Thank you for your consideration and anticipated support.

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