



SB535--Human Relations – Housing Discrimination – Service Dogs and Guide Dogs

Support

Testimony of Maryland Centers for Independent Living

House Judicial Proceedings Committee, February 23, 2023

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.

The Maryland White Cane Law guarantees civil rights protection to users of service animals including guide dogs. There is one serious omission to the protection of these rights; users whose service dogs are no longer able to work must choose between being able to keep their dogs or finding another place to live. Landlords and Home Owner Associations (HOAs) sometimes force the disabled person to put the dog down or give the dog to another person. They also sometimes allow the owner to keep the dog, but demand monetary compensation.

The Independent Living community recognizes the value service dogs provide to the lives of people with disabilities, and the emotional connection that exists between the dog and the handler which continues after the dog is no longer able to work. Service dogs retire for a number of reasons, including age, health conditions, or other inabilities that prevent working. A service animal user may have many years with their retired service dog and wish to maintain lifelong companionship with their dog. Having to put the dog down, rehome it, or find a new place for the handler to live in order to keep the retired service animal represents an unnecessary hardship for both the handler and the service animal.

Senate Bill 535 remedies this issue by exempting renters with retired service dogs from pet fees and housing denial due to rental policy regarding dogs. The proposed legislation will have little impact on the landlord or HOA. The landlord will still receive their rent as governed by the lease or their HOA fees as governed by the HOA. The Independent Living community is in favor of this legislation as it will benefit service animal users and the dogs who spend their lives forming bonds with them.

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