

**To:** Maryland Environment & Transportation Committee

**Date:** 14 February, 2023

**From:** Matthew Hackert

[mhackert@nfb.org](mailto:mhackert@nfb.org)

**Address:** 5719 Kavon Ave, Baltimore, MD 21206

**Subject:** Support for Maryland SB535

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to you advocating in favor of Maryland SB535, which would extend existing protection given to service dogs through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) beyond their working life, through their retirement. These protections include exemptions from pet restrictions and surcharges by landlords which for blind guide dog users would in many cases make it prohibitively expensive to keep a guide dog with them after it has passed the age where it can safely and effectively perform its training as a guide, or completely disallow the dog to remain with its handler.

Guide dogs are highly trained animals which are well-socialized to the public. With a competent handler, this training is constantly reinforced throughout the life of the partnership, and continues into the dog's retirement. As a result, a strong bond develops between dog and handler, and separation upon retirement because the handler cannot afford pet fees, or would be barred from keeping the dog with them would constitute a difficult trauma, on top of an already difficult process of simply retiring a dog, and considering acquiring a new dog to replace the retired one.

I am currently working my fifth guide dog, who I brought home from a training program on August 5, 2022. All of my past guides have had very successful partnerships, and because I happened to be a home owner when it was time for them to retire, I could keep them with me while returning to the guide dog school to train with a new guide. However, family circumstances are different this time. My wife and I are in the process of going through a divorce and thus transitioning to separate housing. While we own our home today, this is not a permanent circumstance. We live with my current guide Artemis, as well as my retired dog, Igloo. However, as an example, one affordable rental option charges an additional \$300 monthly [this needs verification; the amount is somewhere between \$250 and \$350] Other housing options have large breed restrictions, or do not allow pets at all.

While things currently remain amicable between my wife and I, this is not guaranteed. But even assuming they stay amicable, it is not certain that she won't also need to find an interim housing solution which could run into the same issue of my retired guide being subject to pet fees or restrictions.

Blind guide dog users like me face great uncertainty in these kinds of situations and may not have local friends or family who would be willing and able to adopt their retired guides. More importantly, many dog handlers may not wish to be forced to give up their retired dog because they are suddenly no longer protected by the ADA. For me, this is certainly presenting some significant challenges and uncertainty.

Kind regards,

Matthew C. Hackert