



NATIONAL FEDERATION  
OF THE BLIND  
MARYLAND

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Subject: Support for SB535

From: Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

To: Members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee

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#### **THE PROBLEM**

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 must choose between being able to keep their dogs when they are no longer able to work and 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.

#### **PROPOSED ACTION**

The House Environment and Transportation Committee should update the White Cane Law to protect the rights of users of service animals including guide dogs. Landlords and HOAs should specifically permit service animals and guide dogs to stay with their owner when retired. The landlord and HOAs should also be prohibited from demanding monetary compensation to permit the service animal to stay on premises once a service animal retires.

## **BACKGROUND**

The White Cane Law has been in operation in Maryland for decades. From time to time, it has been updated when the needs and rights of disabled individuals warrant it. Handlers of service animals, including guide dogs, are permitted to be accompanied by the animal in the employment setting and public accommodations. The service animal is also permitted to guide the disabled handler so that the handler can travel safely in the community. With regard to housing, the law is unsatisfactory and incomplete. Maryland residents have been forced to choose between rehoming their retired guide dogs and moving themselves due to current laws, which do not protect residents whose service animals retire. Disabled users should not only be permitted to rent an apartment or house even though they are accompanied by a service animal or guide dog, but should be able to keep the animal with them when the animal must be retired.

## **BENEFITS OF THE PROPOSED LEGISLATION**

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 handler has an emotional commitment to the guide dog or service animal since they have usually worked with the animal for ten years or more. 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.

## **Conclusion**

The Maryland White Cane Law is an important protection of civil rights. The law will offer stronger protection by amending it to allow a retired animal to stay with its handler. The amendment should contain a specific prohibition against additional compensation for the landlord. Please give a favorable report to SB535.