



February 22, 2024

Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee
The Honorable Chair Brian Feldman
The Honorable Vice Chair Cheryl Kagan
2 West
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

**Re: Senate Bill 0597: Human Services – Individuals with Disabilities and Service-Disabled Veterans
Boating Fund
Favorable Support**

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, Senator Guzzone, our bill sponsor, and Members of the Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee:

On behalf of Brendan Sailing, my name is Dr. Derrick Cogburn, and I am here today in full SUPPORT of SB0597. I have the pleasure of serving on the Board of Directors for Brendan Sailing, and I am also professor at American University, where I serve as the founding executive director of AU's Institute on Disability and Public Policy. I am an avid sailor and one of my personal goals is to involve more marginalized and underrepresented groups in sailing - especially children with neuro differences.

For the past 38 years, Brendan Sailing has been building pathways for self-confidence and personal growth for children with learning differences through individually tailored experiential instruction in sailing. **Passage of this bill and its associated funding grants will help Brendan Sailing expand its reach in this specific community of children who often are overlooked for summer camp programs due to their learning differences and unique challenges for outdoor recreation and education.**

Brendan Sailing believes sailing is not just a recreational activity, but a transformative experience that builds confidence, independence, social and teamwork skills. Our US Sailing certified instructors are trained in working with youth with Learning Differences such as ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, and Level One Autism. Operating out of both Annapolis and St. Mary's College of Maryland, we provide a supportive and inclusive environment where campers can thrive.

At Brendan Sailing, we have a policy that no child is turned away for lack of ability to pay for camp. Scholarships are available and over half our youth attend on scholarships. One hurdle of our program is funding for scholarships. Without adequate funding, we are limited in our ability to provide scholarships to those who need it most. This limits the impact we can make and the number of individuals we can reach. While we actively seek funding for scholarships through grants and donations, additional funding will enable us to reach more at-risk youth with learning differences in underserved populations that would not otherwise have these opportunities. Our 3:1 student to instructor ratio is vital to providing the attention and focus on the unique learning style of each student. This method is extremely effective and also more expensive than traditional camp structure.

Outdoor recreation and education opportunities are often hard to find for children with learning differences such as autism, anxiety, ADHD and other forms of neurodiversity. These opportunities are even more rare for overnight camping experiences. With additional support, we can expand our reach and provide more opportunities for at-risk youth to thrive and succeed.

In addition to sailing, campers participate in fun activities such as kayaking, paddle boarding and beach games. We also educate on marine science and environmental conservation, teaching campers the importance of protecting our Maryland waterways. Our instructors are trained in the Brendan Approach, a proven instructional method to reach this population. Brendan Sailing students' newly found confidence, expanded skills and new friendships extend far past their camp timeline. One student remarked once that the skills she learned through Brendan to navigate the waters and be aware of her surroundings and fellow sailors helped her obtain her driver's license and the independence this momentous occasion brings to young people.

Other students have similar comments. One camper remarked "I have friends now for the first time. I text with them throughout the year and can't wait to see them again next summer. Before I spent all my time playing Xbox and drawing by myself. "

Parents also articulate the transformation they see in their kids. "The changes in our son have been nothing short of amazing. This young man, so hesitant and shy, is now engaging with others, starts what

he finishes, and has successfully transitioned to colleges. This would not have been possible without the support of Brendan Sailing.” – Parent of a 2023 Camper

“Brendan Sailing is a phenomenal program that my grandson attended the summer of 2023 at St Mary’s College. Not only did he learn how to sail, he walked out with much more confidence in himself. The instructors, along with the volunteers, were always working with the campers and engaging them in every aspect. We have attended many camps, but Brendan Sailing tops them all. We hope to go back every year. Thank you for the great experience” – Maria Hall

“We had a fabulous experience with Brendan Sailing this summer. My daughter was able to thrive here in an environment that was designed for kids just like her. She was pushed out of her comfort zone in just the right ways and then supported by great coaches the whole time. Fabulous experience for her and the whole family.” – Laura Smith

“This is, hands down, one of the best activities that my grandchildren have ever taken part in, and that is saying a lot! The staff and volunteers are dedicated, kind, and upbeat. They know kids and how to deal with them, moodiness and all! The kids now have a love of sailing that’ll stay with them forever. They are confident and genuinely happy when they get to take friends and family out on the boat, all by themselves, at the end of each session! Please, support Brendan sailing, and by all means, send your children!” – Peggy Thompson

Instructors are also amazed at the power this program provides for the youth, as well as themselves.

Jodi Weinbecker, a long-time sailing instructor and facilitator of the Brendan Approach training for instructors, shares her experience teaching at Brendan Sailing the past two years: “After having coached and trained youth sailors from beginners to international competitors – I wish I would have had the opportunity to work with this program earlier in my career. I have always worked with kids with Learning Differences – I just didn’t see the challenges from their perspective, so I never really coached or taught the child as a whole. These kids with learning differences just don’t get opportunities like this!

“Sailing teaches independence, teamwork, multi-tasking, problem solving, dealing with adversity, overcoming fear, math, science, socializing, communicating, being in touch with the natural environment, disconnecting from technology, fear and joy, exhilarating and naturally calming all at the same time.

“Unlike any other sport I have ever played – and I have played most – the level of determination, self-confidence and overcoming obstacles that are required to make a sailboat go just does not compare to any other sport. Watching these kids who don’t typically have great sport experiences, school experiences, or friend experiences come together as a group and bond is incredibly special to witness. Watching them learn the skills and gain the confidence to take their parents sailing at the end of the camp is truly heartwarming.”

Volunteer and Sailing Instructor Dianne Sullivan, whose nephew has also been through the program, shares the following: “While I had been well acquainted and helped with the Brendan Sailing program in the past, never did the success and importance of the mission hit closer to home than when my autistic nephew attended the camp three summers ago. Prior to this, my nephew was most comfortable alone and in front of a computer screen. It was magical to see the transformation as he got outside all day every day for a full two weeks, learned skills and outdoor awareness that he had never experienced or thought of previously, accepted that he could be off his electronics and socially interactive without the world ending (I cannot stress how important that is for these kids!), and successfully conquered some fears. He felt empowered!

“Other Brendan campers I instructed similarly came to life as they became captains of their own boats, without full hands-on adult assistance, which is a big change for them; conquered fears of a boat capsizing; and mastered the understanding of how wind can fill sails and propels a boat. The campers themselves say how freeing and exciting it is to be out on the water, mastering boat handling, while also having fun! You’d just have to come to Parents’ Day at the end of each session to see these students proudly take their parents sailing – it’s truly something heartwarming to see!!”

On the Brendan Sailing website, www.brendansailing.org, you can watch a wonderful video from last summer’s camps.

For these reasons, Brendan Sailing enthusiastically supports SB 0597 and urges a favorable report from the Committee.