

I am writing on behalf of Dogs for Better Lives, writing to express our strong support for SB 796, the Maryland Blind and Deaf Service Animal Program. Dogs for Better Lives (DBL) is an organization dedicated to enhancing the lives of individuals through the placement of highly trained Service Dogs, and we believe that this bill is crucial in increasing funding and access to individuals in the deaf and hard of hearing community.

Increasing the available funding for these life-changing service dogs will significantly enhance DBL's capacity to train and place more hearing dogs. As evidenced by the words of our Maryland-based client who takes his Hearing Service Dog to work with him at the White House, these dogs provide additional independence and safety.

“Jamie has added a strong sense of reassurance and heightened awareness in my life. He is always in tune with his surroundings and never fails to let me know when there are important sounds. He is the alarm master! Oven and smoke alarms - even phones! He will search high and low for me to alert me to a sound. I know that I’ll never miss alarm with Jamie around!”

It is our experience that there is a clear demand for Hearing Service Dogs in Maryland. We have several individuals in the state currently on our organization’s waitlist and multiple active Hearing Dog Teams.

DBL has a rich history as the oldest provider of professionally trained Hearing Service Dogs in the United States, having placed 1,700 dogs nationally since 1977. Our Hearing Dog program currently has nearly two dozen deserving individuals on our wait list. However, with wait times up to 3 years to receive a dog, there remains a significant portion of individuals in Maryland and across the nation who require Hearing Service Dogs but do not have access to them.

Hearing Service Dogs are trained to alert to specific household sounds by making physical contact (jumping on you or nosing their handler) then leading the handler to the sound. Core household sounds include the smoke alarm, oven timer, name call, baby cry, door knock, phone, and alarm clock. We also train the dogs to alert to sounds in public and provide additional training to clients for personalized alerts.

The time and commitment to train Service Dogs is significant. It takes approximately 4-6 months to professionally train a Hearing Service Dog, and that time is even longer for purpose-bred dogs who are supported from birth to 14 months of age by our organization in collaboration with volunteer Puppy Raisers. In addition to the funding and time required to train and place a Hearing Service Dog, it is essential to also consider the lifetime commitment involved, which includes ongoing support and client follow-ups throughout the life of the team.

A 2021 study in the UK, known as the PEDRO study, showed that people who had received a Hearing Service Dog had increased wellbeing and were less dependent on others. The study also found that Hearing Service Dog recipients had significant less feelings of isolation and fear, both in their home and out in public.

We believe the establishment of the Maryland Blind and Deaf Service Animal Program has the potential to significantly enhance the quality of life for deaf or hard-of-hearing adults, offering them not only companionship but also independence and safety.

In conclusion, we express our support for SB 796, as it will increase access and funding for Hearing Service Dogs so that more individuals in Maryland can access these life-changing dogs.