

**Testimony on SB 595
March 6, 2025
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
Maryland Senate**

Chair Guzzone and Vice Chair Rosapepe

MY NAME IS MARY KAYE VAVASOUR and I am appearing in support of SB 595 the State Lottery Fund—Laurel Race Course—Local Impact Aid.

I have been a resident of the Laurel/Beltsville area for almost 30 years and have been active in local civic affairs as the President of my Homeowners Association and member of the Vansville Heights Civic Association.

I grew up around thoroughbred racing—my family is from the Saratoga Springs area, and I spend August there with family and friends who are active participants as owners and breeders.

I have been an active advocate for thoroughbred aftercare since 2007, on both the national and state level. I have twice testified in the House of Delegates in support of legislation to provide funding for aftercare, and I take care of a Maryland-bred mare who I rescued in 2017 –she lives at The Foxie G Foundation in Union Bridge and I am active in fundraising for them.

Despite all of that involvement with racing for over 50 years, I came to an awareness of the needs of the backstretch community by happenstance.

Last August, I visited Chuck Simon, a former trainer and friend at Saratoga Hospital. Chuck had only recently been diagnosed with colon cancer and was days away from dying. While not nationally known, Chuck was highly regarded in racing for his horsemanship and his candid opinions about the sport, which he shared in his “Going in Circles” podcast.

Several well-known trainers got their start in Racing as assistant trainers to Chuck, including Breeders Cup winners Cherie DeVaux and Phil D’Amato, as well as Danny Gargan, who trained Dornoch, last year’s Belmont Stakes winner.

His hospital room was a clearinghouse of famous trainers, owners, jockeys and sports media figures—as well as many grooms, hotwalkers and other modest participants in the sport.

Over the 4 days that I visited him, I asked him what advice he would give to the team that was reinventing racing in Maryland—he had two suggestions

- 1. Make sure you have enough race days because thoroughbreds need to race in order to learn how to be racehorses**
- 2. Take better care of the backstretch workers.**

He introduced me to Nick Karas from the NY Racetrack Chaplaincy, and Nick connected me to the Maryland Racetrack Chaplain, Pastor Ron Singh.

Pastor Ron invited me to his Wednesday night service for backstretch workers and it was a revelation. Since then, I've spent many hours visiting with backstretch workers and advocates, talking to trainers and industry participants about the current situation ---of a sport in transition, with significant challenges, both regulatory, financial, and competitive with other forms of gambling... but the one thing everyone is in agreement on is the NEED TO TAKE BETTER CARE OF THE PEOPLE WHO TAKE CARE OF THE HORSES. It is not an exaggeration to say the sport cannot exist without them. Very few are aware of the difficulties they overcome to do that—and how indebted we are to them for their willingness to make it their life's work.

MTHA and its Foundation, along with The Maryland Jockey Club provide significant support to the backstretch community but there is great competition for their limited funds.

With this bill and the efforts of MTROA to build a world-class thoroughbred training facility at Shamrock Farm, including modern facilities for backstretch workers, I believe Maryland has an opportunity to demonstrate to the industry and the general public that caring for this segment of the thoroughbred racing workforce is an essential component to

making Maryland racing a healthy and successful sport, one in which the state of Maryland has made an enormous financial investment. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that “Maryland is now in the Racing business”. I urge you to reaffirm Maryland’s commitment to these essential workers in that business and pass SB 595.