

**SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
SENATE BILL 157
Maryland Disability Service Animal Program - Established
January 15, 2025
Position: SUPPORT**

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) submits this testimony in support of Senate Bill 157, which seeks to establish the Maryland Disability Service Animal Program and Fund within the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD). This legislation represents a critical step toward ensuring that individuals with disabilities in Maryland have equitable access to highly trained service animals, which are indispensable for promoting independence, safety, and quality of life.

Service animals are crucial in removing barriers for people with disabilities by offering specialized support tailored to their needs. These animals are trained to perform tasks such as medical alerts, mobility assistance, and sensory regulation, enabling individuals with disabilities to live, work, and engage in their communities more independently.

Despite the demonstrated benefits of service animals, access to these critical supports remains limited due to high costs, placing this resource out of reach for many individuals with disabilities—particularly those with limited incomes. Senate Bill 157 addresses this inequity by creating a funding mechanism to assist eligible Marylanders in obtaining service animals and providing administrative oversight to ensure the program’s success.

The inclusion of amendments recommended by The Arc Maryland in last year’s iteration of this bill strengthens its framework. The use of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) definition of disability ensures alignment with federal standards, while provisions for nonprofit training entities establish clear guidelines for the selection and operation of program partners. These measures enhance the program’s accessibility and sustainability.

Research supports the transformative impact of service animals on the lives of individuals with disabilities. A 2023 study from the National Library of Medicine found that service animals improve emotional well-being,

community participation, and quality of life for their handlers with accompanying decreases in reliance on other state services.¹ Notably, 83% of respondents to the study reported a decrease in paid or unpaid assistance hours from state services.² By reducing reliance on other forms of assistance, service animals generate cost savings for healthcare systems and social services, providing both personal and societal benefits.

In closing, Senate Bill 157 is an important opportunity to advance equity and independence for Marylanders with disabilities. By supporting this legislation, the General Assembly can ensure that service animals are no longer an unattainable resource but a readily available tool for empowerment and inclusion. Thank you for your consideration of this critical bill.

For these reasons, we request a favorable report on SB 157. Please do not hesitate to contact me at GabrielR@DisabilityRightsMD.org, or by phone at 443-692-2483.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Gabriel Rubinstein
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¹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10670951/#B3-healthcare-11-02987>.

² *Id.*