



**Metropolitan
Washington Ear**

Committee: Senate Finance Committee

Bill Number: Senate Bill 157 – Maryland Disability Service Animal Program – Established

Hearing Date: January 15, 2025

Position: Support

Metropolitan Washington Ear, Inc. (MWE) located in Silver Spring, Maryland, is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization incorporated under the laws of the State of Maryland. MWE provides reading and information services, and independent living skills training for blind, visually impaired, and physically disabled people who cannot effectively read print, see plays, watch television programs and films, or view museum exhibits. Established in 1974, we've been providing quality services throughout Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia for more than 50 years. As an organization that serves the disabled community and fights for access for our community, we **SUPPORT** SB 157.

SB 157 would establish the Maryland Disability Service Animal Program in the Department of Disabilities and require the Department to select a nonprofit training entity or entities to participate in the Program. This legislation also creates the Maryland Disability Service Animal Program Fund as a special, nonlapsing fund.

Service animals help people with disabilities live more independently and fulfilling lives. They can provide mobility assistance, help with vision and hearing, and offer mental health support. There are various types of service animals, many of those who we serve utilize a "blind and visually impaired service dog," otherwise known as a guide dog. This dog is specifically trained to assist individuals with blindness or severe visual impairment by guiding them around obstacles, alerting them to changes in terrain like stairs or curbs, and helping them navigate safely in public spaces.

Currently, across the country there is a backlog of service animals specifically, service dogs and it can take years to get a trained service dog. This is due to a shortage of volunteers to raise puppies before training begins. The establishment of this program and fund could help expedite access to a service dog, in which, for many in the disabled community is the way to independence.

For these reasons, MWE **supports SB 157** and **ask the committee for a favorable report**.

If we can provide any additional information, please contact Jocelyn I. Collins at jcollins@policypartners.net.