



**MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS & MILITARY FAMILIES**

Office of the Secretary

WES MOORE
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Lt. Governor
ANTHONY WOODS
Secretary

**House Bill 384 - Maryland Disability Service Animal Program - Established
Letter of Information**

January 24, 2025

The Honorable Joseline Pena-Melnyk
House and Government Operations Committee
240 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk and Members of the House and Government Operations Committee-

This letter of information provides clarification regarding the history, funding, scope, operations, and resource requirements of the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program, managed by the Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families. We hope it will inform your efforts to better understand the fiscal and operational implications of HB384.

Program History and Funding

The Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program and Fund was established by the General Assembly in 2017 to award grants to Maryland-based service animal training organizations. While the program received private donations (approximately \$10,000) in its inaugural year, it did not receive its first general funds appropriation of \$150,000 until 2019. Since then, the program has continued to receive small private donations, which have been insufficient to fully meet its operational needs. Annual general fund appropriations between 2019 and the present have ranged from \$55,000 to \$250,000.

Initial Development and Management

From 2017 to 2022, the program was overseen by the department's communications, outreach, and advocacy program director. During its development phase, the personnel conducted extensive research into existing service animal programs and engaged with organizations such as Assistance Dogs International, the US Department of Veterans Affairs, and Wounded Warrior

Project to establish regulations and procedures aligned with best practices. At that time, the average cost to train a service dog was estimated at \$20,000.

Program Scope and Evolution

Initially, the program provided reimbursements to approved service animal training organizations after a service animal was placed with an eligible veteran. Early participants included Hero Dogs and Warrior Canine Connection. In 2019, the program expanded to include equine therapy, allowing approved organizations to request reimbursements after eligible veterans completed a specified number of counseling sessions.

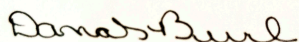
Redesign and Current Operations

In 2022, the program underwent significant redesign, resulting in the hiring of a part-time contractual employee (20 hours per week) to manage daily operations. This grant specialist oversees various administrative and programmatic tasks, including:

- Updating the program's notice of funding availability.
- Hosting technical assistance calls.
- Reviewing grant applications.
- Collaborating with the grant review committee.
- Evaluating and approving mid-cycle and end-of-cycle grant reports.
- Addressing grantee questions and concerns throughout the year.

With the new design and leadership of both the communications, outreach, and advocacy program director and grant specialist, in the last two years the program has served more than 500 veterans, provided more than 2,800 equine therapy sessions, certified 15 service dogs, trained more than 90 staff and volunteers in military cultural competency and suicide prevention, certified more than 20 equine therapy staff by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, and certified 8 equine therapy staff by the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association. The updated structure aims to ensure that the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program continues to meet its objectives while adapting to evolving needs.

Sincerely,



Dana Burl
Deputy Secretary, Military Family Policy and Programs
Department of Veterans and Military Families