

by Kimberly K. Egan, MHC Government Relations Committee



The 2021 legislative session of the Maryland General Assembly is underway, and the Maryland Horse Council's Government Relations Committee has been hard at work reviewing the proposed legislation and identifying those bills that could affect the horse industry.

To date, the Horse Council has taken written positions on two bills – one that would include therapy horses in the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program, and one that would expand Sunday deer hunting in Queen Anne's County.

Therapy Horses (SB 284/HB 660)

Senator Bryan Simonaire (R – Anne Arundel County) introduced legislation that would add a definition of “therapy horse” to the list of service animals eligible for reimbursement by the State's Veterans Service Animal Program. Sen. Simonaire reached out to the Horse Council for help with the definition of “therapy horse.” We in turn reached out to the therapy horse community for input.

The bill had originally required stables to be Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) Premier Accredited Centers (PAC) or to have Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) certified professionals on staff.

MHC asked Sen. Simonaire to remove the PATH and EAGALA requirements, which can be unnecessarily restrictive, and replace it with language that would define a “therapy horse” as “a horse determined appropriate for interactions with veterans by a Horse Discovery Center certified by the state that: (I) is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability, or (II) serves as an emotional support or therapy animal that a medical professional, within the medical professional's scope of practice, has determined provides benefit to an individual with a sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability.”

Corinne Pouliquen testified on behalf of the MHC at the February 2 Senate committee hearing. As of press, we await further developments.

Queen Anne's County Sunday Hunting (HB 225/SB 605)

Delegate Steven Arentz (R – Eastern Shore) introduced legislation that would allow hunting on private land on each Sunday of each game bird or game mammal season. This “all Sundays, all seasons, all species” approach would expand the number of Sundays available for just deer hunting from each Sunday during deer firearms season, and three Sun-

days in October and one in November during deer bow season, to almost all Sundays year-round for all species.

The Horse Council reached out to its membership in Queen Anne's County and filed written testimony opposing the bill. MHC has consistently opposed expansion of Sunday hunting because the majority of our members oppose it, and because MHC has tried for over 20 years to preserve Sundays as the one day of the week when children and adults, hikers, birdwatchers, dog walkers, trail riders and other outdoor enthusiasts could enjoy the outdoors without concern for adverse interactions with hunters. This is especially so now that use of public natural resources has increased dramatically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

MHC testified at the House committee hearing on February 3. As with the therapy horse bill, we await further developments.

Upcoming Bills

MHC intends to testify on two other bills – a Sunday hunting bill in Talbot County (HB 325) and a “cost of care” bill for animal shelters (HB 1080/SB 760).

The Talbot County bill would increase the available Sundays for deer hunting from only the first Sunday during firearms season and three Sundays in October and one in November during bow season, to all Sundays from October to January. It would also add one Sunday in turkey season. We anticipate making the same arguments as we did for the Queen Anne's County bill. The House committee hearing is February 17.

The animal shelter cost of care bill would, generally speaking, require the owners under investigation for animal cruelty to pay the costs of caring for the animal after the animal has been seized, or forfeit all rights to the animal. MHC has opposed such bills in the past because of due process concerns.

MHC is considering a number of alternatives to propose to the sponsors, and we intend to testify at the hearings, which are not yet scheduled.

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