

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of Disability Rights



B23-487, the “Service Animal in Training
Clarification Amendment Act of 2019”

Testimony of
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Director

Before the
Committee on Human Services
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Brianne Nadeau, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building
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Washington, DC 20004
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Good afternoon, Chairperson Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Mathew McCollough, and I am the Director of the Office of Disability Rights (ODR)¹. Thank you very much for allowing me to provide testimony on Bill 23-487, the “Service Animal in Training Clarification Amendment Act of 2019.” The Executive supports the intent of this bill and, if passed, looks forward to working with the Committee in implementing Bill 23-487 accordingly and increasing access for all residents.

ODR exclusively focuses on the District of Columbia Government’s commitment to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and compliance with all other federal and local disability-related laws. This directive paved the way for the District to become a nationally-recognized leader in serving people with disabilities. ODR actively supports, promotes, and works to advance the protections available under the ADA and other laws impacting our citizens with disabilities in areas of community living, recreation, employment, health care, education, and other Government programs and services.

This Bill amends DC Code §7-1009(6)(c) to specify that a service animal in training may accompany its handler (referenced as “owner” throughout this testimony) in places of public accommodation and DC Government facilities to allow the service animal to acquire the necessary skills in learning and performing the work or tasks for which it is being trained. This change in legislation is significant to many people with disabilities who use service animals as a reasonable accommodation under the DC Human Rights Act to navigate their surroundings. It recognizes that an important part of the service animal’s training hinges on its ability to experience how its owner functions in their everyday environment and how they interact with the world around them.

For people with epilepsy, the amended law allows a service dog in training to accompany its owner daily and learn the distinct signs and stimuli that indicate when its owner is having a seizure. The

¹ <https://odr.dc.gov/>



relationship between service animal and owner is a key component of a seizure dog's training. Allowing the seizure dog to accompany its owner to all places where the person would normally go while recognizing his or her signs of distress would allow the service animal to more effectively save the owner's life. Similarly, a service animal training to recognize drops in blood sugar levels would have the opportunity to learn alongside its handler to recognize their specific signs of diabetic ketosis, so that it could alert them to seek immediate medical attention.

While the Americans with Disabilities Act is silent on service animals in training, the United States Department of Justice recognizes the right states have to allow the service dogs into the community with their owners to provide them with "on-the-job" learning experiences². As is true under the ADA, no particular type of license or certification is required for a service animal to be allowed as a reasonable accommodation for their owner. What is required is that the service dog is trained to perform a specific task or type of work. Under the Bill's amendment, the owner is still responsible for keeping the service animal under control, including feeding, grooming, and allowing the animal to relieve itself. Furthermore, the service animal's owner would be responsible for complying with any DC-based animal laws, such as maintaining up to date registration and vaccinations.

In closing, for people with disabilities, allowing their service animal in training to accompany them wherever they may go could be the difference that allows them to safely access their community without fear of finding themselves without assistance in cases of sudden medical emergency.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

² https://www.ada.gov/regs2010/service_animal_qa.html

