

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

House Bill 1568
Judiciary

(Delegate Ross)

Local Government - Animal Control - Dogs At Large (Dog Leash Laws)

This bill requires each county and municipality in the State to adopt local laws that: (1) prohibit the owner of a dog from allowing the dog to be at large; (2) establish procedures for the impoundment of a dog found at large by an animal control unit or other enforcement entity; and (3) establish civil and criminal penalties. The bill establishes that it is the intent of the General Assembly that the bill be applied and interpreted to recognize the definition of the term “running at large” as used by the Appellate Court of Maryland in *Blitzer v. Breski*, 259 Md. App. 257 (2023). The bill does not preempt a local government from enacting and enforcing more stringent measures than the requirements of the bill.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The bill does not materially affect State operations or finances.

Local Effect: The bill may have a material operational impact on counties and municipalities, as discussed below. Local revenues are not materially affected.

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Current Law: State law does not define “running at large,” although the term is referenced throughout the local government article. However, the Appellate Court of Maryland, in *Blitzer v. Breski*, 259 Md. App. 257 (2023), determined that the term “running at large” is, “an idiom meaning free, unrestrained, or not under control.”

Dangerous Dogs

§ 10-619 of the Criminal Law Article defines “dangerous dog” as one that has killed or inflicted severe injury on a person without provocation or is determined to be potentially

dangerous by a local government and, after that determination (1) bites a person; (2) kills or inflicts severe injury on a domestic animal when the dog is not on its owner's real property; or (3) attacks without provocation.

A local jurisdiction may determine that a dog is potentially dangerous if it finds that the dog has inflicted a bite on a person while on public or private real property; has killed or inflicted severe injury on a domestic animal when not on its owner's real property; or has attacked without provocation. The jurisdiction must notify the dog owner in writing of the reasons for its determination.

A dog owner may not leave a dangerous dog unattended on the owner's real property unless the dog is confined indoors, is in a securely enclosed and locked pen, or is in another structure designed to restrain the dog. A dog owner may not allow a dangerous dog to leave the owner's real property unless the dog is leashed and muzzled or is otherwise securely restrained and muzzled.

An owner of a dangerous or potentially dangerous dog who sells or gives the dog to another must provide, in writing, specified information about the new owner to the local government unit that made the determination about the dog and notify the new owner about the dog's dangerous or potentially dangerous behavior. A person who violates these provisions is guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to a maximum fine of \$2,500.

Liability for Damage and Death Caused by a Dog

Chapters 48 and 49 of 2014 established that in an action for damages against an owner of a dog for personal injury or death caused by the dog, evidence that the dog caused the personal injury or death creates a rebuttable presumption that the owner knew or should have known that the dog had vicious or dangerous propensities. Notwithstanding any other law or rule, the judge in a jury trial may not rule as a matter of law that the presumption has been rebutted before the jury returns a verdict.

However, the owner of a dog is strictly liable for any injury, death, or loss to person or property that is caused by the dog while the dog was running at large unless the injury, death, or loss was caused to the body or property of a person who was (1) committing or attempting to commit a trespass or other criminal offense on the property of the owner; (2) committing or attempting to commit a criminal offense against any person; or (3) teasing, tormenting, abusing, or provoking the dog.

Local Regulation of Dogs

Regulation of dogs as pets is a highly localized process, with many local governments having their own rules and regulations governing the licensure and care of dogs.

Local Fiscal Effect: The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) advises that the provisions of the bill are likely to have a material operational effect on county governments. MACo points out that each county may have different laws regarding “dogs at large,” commonly referred to as “leash laws,” which may vary from the provisions required by the bill. Counties would be required to alter their laws to comply with the bill.

The Maryland Municipal League advises that municipalities may incur costs related to the capture, impoundment, and holding of dogs.

Most local governments that responded to the request for information for this fiscal and policy note did not indicate a fiscal or operational effect due to the bill, with several pointing to the fact that they already define “running at large”; however, the Department of Legislative Services notes that to the extent a local definition differs from the definition specified in the bill, local governments may experience an operational impact. Further, local government expenditures related to animal control enforcement may increase under the bill.

While it is possible local revenues may increase under the bill from fines or fees, this analysis assumes that dog owners will generally comply with the provisions of the bill and that any impact on revenues will be minimal.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Maryland Association of Counties; Harford, Montgomery, and Talbot counties; Maryland Municipal League; Department of Legislative Services

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Analysis by: Kayvon Samadani

Direct Inquiries to:
(410) 946-5510
(301) 970-5510