

Therapeutic, Aftercare & Equine-Assisted Services Sector Advisory Committee Meeting Summary

February 17, 2026 (Virtual Meeting)

Advisory Committee:

Open discussion was encouraged from a horse industry wide perspective and perspective given within that Therapeutic, Aftercare & Equine-Assisted Services Committee. Notes from the Steering Committee prior meetings were distributed prior to the Advisory Meeting.

This virtual meeting brought together leaders from therapeutic riding programs, aftercare organizations, rescues, and state agencies to discuss Maryland's horse industry strategic plan. Participants emphasized building connections across sectors, improving public access to resources, and addressing shared challenges for greater industry sustainability.

Maryland's Horse Ecosystem and Shared Messages

Committee members agreed on promoting Maryland's horse ecosystem as a compassionate, interconnected network where horses support human growth, recovery, and community well-being. They highlighted the need for consistent storytelling that links all aspects of the horse industry - like horse and human connections, youth programs, recreation, and therapeutic services, viewing aftercare and therapy as natural extensions of horses careers. Opportunities include cross-promotion at horse events to align narratives and reduce intimidation for newcomers.

Themes raised:

- Horses are not only athletes or recreation animals—they are partners in healing, recovery, education, and second chances, serving veterans, children, seniors, people with disabilities, and at-risk horses simultaneously.
- The horse experience itself (not just riding) is powerful and accessible—programs emphasize quiet interaction, grooming, presence, and observation as meaningful entry points.
- Therapeutic, aftercare, and equine-assisted services were repeatedly framed as human services, animal welfare, and land-based community infrastructure, not fringe activities.
- Participants emphasized that public perception still underestimates this sector's social value and professionalism.

Why the Horse Industry Matters to Maryland

The group described the industry as vital for therapeutic purposes, life style, health, and

recreation . Specific examples included agritourism potential, farm tours drawing crowds, and the role of licensed stables in supporting local economies, with calls to quantify impacts via updated data for policymakers.

- Equine-assisted and therapeutic programs directly support:
 - Veterans and military families
 - Children with physical, cognitive, and emotional needs
 - Aging populations
 - Horses transitioning from racing or prior careers
- Aftercare programs (especially track-based models) were cited as essential to maintaining the industry's social license to operate, particularly in racing.
- Open farm tours and hands-on exposure were identified as one of the most effective public-engagement tools, outperforming traditional events in attendance and impact.

Connection and Fragmentation Within the Industry

Fragmentation stems from scattered information sources, lack of a centralized directory, and limited cross-sector awareness, making it hard for programs to refer clients or horses effectively. Ideas for unity include a user-friendly, regularly updated statewide directory of licensed facilities, improved SEO for state websites, joint expos or farm tours, and leveraging social media storytelling for broader reach.

Strong consensus that the sector is highly fragmented, with:

- Multiple lists, directories, and networks that do not talk to each other
- Not having one trust source to turn to for reference and recommendations
- Heavy reliance on word-of-mouth and personal referrals

Programs struggle to refer participants to their next step in the Horse Industry because there is no trusted, central, public-facing directory of services and organizations.

Certain participants emphasized geographic isolation and the difficulty of connecting families to programs in different parts of the state.

Fragmentation between:

- Racing - aftercare - lesson barns - therapeutic programs
- National organizations - Maryland-specific resources

Coordination and Statewide Leadership

Participants supported a dedicated entity, role, or position, to coordinate efforts through

convening stakeholders, maintaining directories, marketing, data collection, and policy advocacy. Realistic functions include facilitating partnerships with commerce and tourism departments, standardizing licensing, and organizing recurring events like farm tours modeled on successful pilots.

Participants repeatedly asked for state-facilitated coordination, not state control:

- A neutral “connector” role to help programs find each other
- Support for cross-sector convenings, site visits, and shared learning

Track-based aftercare programs (e.g., Beyond the Wire) were cited as models of coordination, due to:

- Physical presence on the backstretch
- Trusted relationships with horsemen
- Clear intake, funding, and placement pathways

Strong interest in formalizing partnerships with Commerce, Tourism, and Ag-Tourism initiatives.

Information Needs for Decision-Makers

Decision-makers require clear metrics on economic value (e.g., jobs, tourism revenue), community stories (e.g., therapeutic impacts), and reports highlighting land preservation and workforce roles. Persuasive tools include infographics, farm tour data showing high attendance, and integrated agritourism plans to demonstrate the Therapeutic, Aftercare & Equine-Assisted Services sector's contributions.

Legislators and agency partners need:

- Clear explanation of what equine-assisted services are (beyond riding)
- Concrete examples of real-world human impacts, not just horse
- Visibility into how horses transition safely between careers

Participants raised the importance of storytelling (case studies, visuals, social media) over abstract statistics.

Concern that state websites are difficult to navigate, poorly optimized for search, and inaccessible to the general public.

Financial Sustainability of Operations

Rising costs like hay, insurance, and worker health coverage challenge small

operations, lesson barns, and events. Pressures include unaffordable liability insurance, and infrastructure needs; solutions discussed involved unified insurance approaches, and other industry examples to lower premiums.

Major pressures cited:

- Stable and horse care costs
- Insurance premiums (liability, workers' comp, health insurance)
- Aging horses requiring lifetime care

Nonprofits noted the absence of:

- Affordable insurance options
- Shared models

Track-based aftercare stipends were helpful but insufficient for lifetime care. Programs emphasized that sustainability conversations must move toward why investment protects horses, people, and public trust.

Entry Points and Pathways Into the Industry

Lesson barns, youth programs, aftercare, and discovery centers serve as key gateways, needing support like directories, subsidies for accreditation (e.g., PATH Intl.), and promotion to ensure accessibility. Pathways to careers in the horse industry or lifelong involvement could expand via horse industry liaison programs such as marketing ex-racehorses for lessons.

Entry points identified:

- Horse Discovery Centers
- Farm tours and open houses
- Non-riding equine-assisted experiences

Participants stressed the intimidation barrier for newcomers:

- Horses' size
- Technical language
- Tack and equipment complexity

Strong support for:

- Guided introductions with professionals

- “Hand-off” pathways between beginner programs and more advanced disciplines

Desire to normalize horses as approachable and welcoming, not exclusive.

Workforce and Careers in the Horse Industry

Attracting and retaining workers faces issues like low wages, and lack of benefits in roles from horse stables/farm work. Improvements include career awareness campaigns, training programs, group health plans, programs build trust through on-site presence and funding stipends.

Workforce challenges included:

- Difficulty offering affordable health insurance
- High liability exposure
- Physically demanding work with limited career ladders

Many programs rely on:

- Volunteers
- Second-career professionals
- Passion rather than compensation

Participants emphasized the need to frame equine-assisted services as legitimate career paths, not volunteer hobbies. Aftercare professionals highlighted the emotional labor involved in long-term horse stewardship.

Major Takeaways and Next Steps

Recurring themes were the need for a centralized, dynamic directory; stronger racing-aftercare-therapy linkages; and public outreach via tours and storytelling to combat fragmentation and boost sustainability. Consensus points include elevating professionalism through expanded licensing, partnering on agritourism, and quantifying impacts for funding. Recommendations for the strategic plan: prioritize directory development, recurring farm tours, insurance reforms, and track-based transition models for all breeds

This sector clearly sees itself as a bridge—between horses and people, racing and retirement, therapy and agriculture—but lacks the connective infrastructure to function as a system. The strongest calls were for coordination, visibility, and legitimacy—not regulation or one-size-fits-all solutions.

Questions, or interest in joining an Advisory Committee please contact:

Chris Merz
Executive Director of the Maryland Racing Commission
christopher.merz@maryland.gov

Anne Litz
Executive Director of the Maryland Horse Industry Board
anne.litz@maryland.gov