



**Testimony of
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**HB 129
Vehicle Laws - Horse Riding - Helmet Requirement for Minors
House Environmental Matters Committee
Maryland General Assembly**

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Children's National Medical Center (Children's National) is pleased to support House Bill (HB) 129, "Vehicle Laws - Horse Riding - Helmet Requirement for Minors." Children's National commends Delegate Joseline Pena-Melnyk for her leadership in introducing this bill, which would require individuals under age 18 riding a horse in most public places to wear a proper helmet.

Children's National Medical Center, a 283 bed not-for-profit academic medical center, is located in Washington, DC, but serves the pediatric health care needs of the broader Washington metropolitan region. Located just three miles from the Maryland border, Children's National annually devotes nearly 60% of its inpatient care to children from Maryland. With five outpatient centers in Maryland and specialty care services provided in eight Maryland locations, Children's National is proud to be one of the largest providers of high quality pediatric primary, specialty and emergency care to Maryland's children and families.

Children's National has long been an advocate for child safety and injury prevention and has implemented programs in the region to raise awareness among parents. Safe Kids Worldwide, the first national advocacy organization solely dedicated to pediatric injury prevention, was founded by Children's National in 1987.

According to Safe Kids, more than 3.5 million children ages 14 and under suffer from sports- and recreation-related injuries each year. Children are more susceptible to these injuries because they are still growing and gaining motor and cognitive skills. Though death is rare among these injuries, brain injury is the leading cause of sports- and recreation-related death. In terms of horseback riding-related deaths, head injuries account for approximately 60 percent of deaths resulting from equestrian accidents according to the American Medical Equestrian Institute.

Though a small percentage of sports- and recreation-related injuries overall, horseback riding-related injuries occur more frequently than one might expect. According to Safe Kids, more than 13,400 children ages 14 and under were treated in hospital emergency rooms for horseback riding-related injuries in 2002 alone. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that riding injuries occur most frequently in riders younger than 21, and about 20 percent of those injuries are to the head. According to a study from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, when using a severity score to compare it with other childhood injuries, horseback riding-related injuries ranked second only to injuries suffered by pedestrians who are struck by a motor vehicle. Horseback riding-related injuries even had a higher

severity score than all-terrain vehicle, bicycle, and passenger motor vehicle crash injuries. When riding a horse, children can be up to eight feet off the ground, which increases the likelihood of significant head injury.

Over the last 10 years, Children's National's Emergency Department has treated approximately 50 children for horseback riding-related injuries. Of these injuries, nearly 30 percent were injuries to the head. While a significant number of the children treated for head injuries were wearing helmets, Children's National did treat one child who passed away from a head injury sustained while horseback riding; it is unknown whether or not the child was wearing a helmet.

Children who do not wear or use protective equipment, particularly helmets, are at a greater risk of sustaining recreational injuries. Lack of awareness about potential injury, inappropriate or unavailable equipment, and lack of money to purchase equipment are some of the reasons children do not use protective gear. In a national survey that asked children ages 8-12 why they choose not to wear a helmet, 47 percent reported that they only ride near home and 43 percent cited "helmets are uncomfortable."

Beyond the physical and emotional devastation of these preventable injuries is the economic impact to families, governments and the health care system in general. Helmets that meet the standards outlined in HB 129 cost approximately \$40—a small investment to ensure that children are protected from serious brain injuries. In addition, the US Pony Club reports that, since it instituted a helmet requirement, there has been a 29 percent reduction in head injuries.

A number of jurisdictions have enacted similar legislation to require children to wear helmets while horseback riding, including the State of New York, and the cities of Plantation, Florida; Bainbridge Island, Washington; and Norco, California. At the federal level, Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT) has proposed legislation that would set certain safety requirements for helmets intended for horseback riders and would award states with federal funds for encouraging helmet use for horseback riders. In many of these cases, legislation was proposed in response to a local child sustaining traumatic injury following a fall from a horse.

Many leading organizations support the use of helmets for children who engage in horseback riding, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the United States Equestrian Federation, the American Medical Equestrian Institute, and Safe Kids USA.

Children's National Medical Center is committed to policies that improve the health and well-being of the children we serve. In fact, it is part of Children's National's mission to improve health outcomes for children regionally, nationally and internationally. As such, Children's National Medical Center respectfully urges the Committee to give a favorable report to HB 129. It is a proactive step that will reduce the incidence of horseback riding-related head and facial injuries to children.