

Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan:

February 2nd 2026:Virtual Meeting

Health and Welfare Advisory Committee:

Open discussion was encouraged from a horse industry wide perspective and perspective given within that Advisory Committee. Notes from the Steering Committee prior meetings were distributed prior to the Advisory Meeting.

Meeting Summary:

The Health and Welfare Advisory Committee met to discuss Maryland's horse industry's ecosystem with a strong, shared commitment to equine health and welfare across all sectors. Participants emphasized the value of establishing consistent, science-based welfare standards, improving public communication about the industry's economic, cultural, and community benefits, and strengthening coordination across sectors. The discussion highlighted ongoing challenges related to workforce shortages, rising operating costs, access to veterinary care, and fragmentation between sectors, alongside opportunities to improve education, documentation, and outreach. Overall there was a shared goal of positioning Maryland as a national leader in equine health, welfare, and stewardship

Maryland's horse ecosystem and shared messages

The Advisory Group agreed that Maryland should communicate a clear, shared identity around horse health and welfare that speaks both to the horse community and to the general public. Participants felt the state should aspire to be known as a place that strives for the welfare of horses' wellbeing —across recreational, racing, breeding, therapy, youth programs, and working horses. Support for having a common baseline “code of care” that sets clear minimum expectations for horse standards of care and welfare, with science-based justification behind those standards, keeping in mind that horses are agriculture. Messaging must be, Science-based, Progressive but practical, Non-judgmental, recognizing different management models for horses. Participants noted that the Maryland Horse Council's existing care pamphlet could serve as a starting point, with targeted updates where needed, but is not a statue. Created a public message that connects all sectors of the horse industry as an ecosystem rather than separate silos. Break welfare into simple, defensible talking points (nutrition, water, safety, hoof care, vaccinations)

Why the horse industry matters to Maryland

The horse industry is seen by the committee as a deeply integrated part of Maryland's economy, culture, and rural landscape. Horses are agriculture, not companion animals, and are deeply integrated into Maryland's economy. Horses are vital to support a broad agricultural supply chain that includes hay and forage production, feed mills, veterinarians, farriers, trucking, equipment sales, manure management, and farm labor .Each horse represents a daily economic footprint (cost-per-horse, per-day framing resonated strongly). They emphasized that

horses help preserve open space and working farmland, supporting rural communities and limiting development pressure. Members also highlighted the historical and cultural significance of horses in Maryland, particularly in racing, foxhunting, and farm-based traditions. In addition, they noted the social and mental health benefits of human–horse interaction, especially through therapeutic riding and community-based programs. Several members suggested that future communications should include clearer economic impact information, including per-horse cost models that show how each horse supports jobs and local businesses. Horses also deliver human health and social benefits: Therapy programs, Community connection, Connection to Agriculture, Volunteer engagement and Sense of purpose for participants

Connection and fragmentation within the industry

Health and welfare is one of the areas where the industry is most aligned, but they acknowledged ongoing fragmentation across sectors depending on technology and reporting. Different disciplines sometimes operate under different expectations, and there is not always a shared understanding of documentation, reporting systems, or health records when horses move between racing, breeding, recreation, competition etc. Members also noted that many people are unfamiliar with how other parts of the industry operate, which can create misunderstanding. They suggested that more consistent basic documentation for horse movement, shared educational materials on welfare standards, and continued cross-sector dialogue could help the industry function more as one system. Tension around “spectrum of care”: Minimum acceptable care vs. ideal care, Need to raise the floor without alienating owners, Recognition that working horses are often misunderstood by the public.

Coordination and statewide leadership

There was general agreement that Maryland would benefit from some form of statewide coordination around horse issues, though no single entity was identified as the clear leader. Policymakers need clear, visual, and practical information, not anecdotes. Welfare must be shown as both a moral responsibility and an economic investment. AAEP.org was suggested as a leader, and useful guide. Participants envisioned a coordinating role that could convene stakeholders, align messaging on welfare, share best practices, connect the industry to existing grants and programs, and help collect and disseminate useful data on horse health, workforce, and land use. Members stressed that whatever structure emerges should be trusted across sectors, credible to policymakers, and connected to both government and the broader horse community. Shared standards and messaging only work if someone is clearly responsible for carrying them forward. Trust matters as much as authority. Veterinarians identified as trusted messengers for: Welfare education, Social license discussions, Public understanding of agriculture vs. pet care, National organizations (e.g., AAEP) have resources, but the challenge is state-level access and coordination. Need for a central, trusted Maryland hub to: Align standards

Information needs for decision-makers

The committee felt that policymakers, legislators, and state agencies need clearer, more accessible information about the horse industry's economic and community value. Members recommended concise, visually compelling materials such as infographics, one-page briefs, and case studies that explain how farms operate, how welfare standards are applied, and how conservation and agricultural programs support both horses and land stewardship. Infographics showing: Economic impact per horse, Workforce tied to equine activity, Land preservation benefits, Concrete examples of existing protections (inspections, vaccination standards, racing oversight) They also emphasized the importance of explaining how existing cost-share and grant programs benefit horse welfare, land management, and rural economies. Communicate with policymakers, Coordinate outreach across sectors. Clear explanation of: What happens to horses at end of life and how euthanasia and disposal are handled and where gaps exist.

Financial sustainability of operations

Rising costs for feed, labor, insurance, and veterinary care are major challenges for small barns, lesson facilities, and smaller programs. Many operations rely on second incomes, boarding, or mixed-use business models to remain viable. Members also noted that liability and insurance barriers make it harder for farms to host visitors, students, or community programs. Members raised concerns about end-of-life issues for horses, including disposal options and financial barriers to humane euthanasia. They also pointed out that many farm owners are unaware of existing grants or cost-share programs that could help with fencing, drainage, pasture improvement, and water systems, suggesting a need for better outreach and coordination. Specific examples - Common challenges: Rising insurance costs, Workforce wages vs. cost of living, limited access to affordable veterinary care. Adaptive models already working- Small farms combining off-farm jobs with horse care, Equine-assisted therapy programs using older or non-rideable horses. Strong interest in: Cost-share programs (mud mitigation, fencing, water systems), Better awareness of existing grants and assistance, Need for affordable euthanasia and disposal options, with Delaware cited as a model.

Entry points and pathways into the industry

Many people want to engage with horses but **don't know how or where to start**. First-time horse ownership is a major risk point. Lesson barns, youth programs, therapeutic riding centers, aftercare organizations, and training facilities are critical entry points into the horse industry. These programs need greater visibility, stronger support, and clearer connections to career pathways in racing, veterinary care, farm management, and equine services. Lack of early education on: Establishing a veterinarian relationship before crisis, True costs of ownership, Positive entry models: Track-based education programs for students, Volunteer and therapy programs, Part-time, flexible horse jobs for adults. Strong emphasis on education before ownership to know what it takes to own a horse. They highlighted the importance of using social media and digital storytelling to engage younger audiences and showcase the diversity of opportunities within the industry.

Workforce and careers in the horse industry

Workforce challenges were a central focus of the discussion. Many horse-related jobs involve long hours, difficult weather conditions, Lack of benefits and relatively low pay, making recruitment and retention difficult, particularly in high-cost regions of Maryland. They also acknowledged national shortages of equine and rural veterinarians. Workforce shortages exist across all levels: Veterinarians, Vet techs, Grooms, hot walkers, barn staff, instructors, etc. Promising strategies: Early exposure (middle school, high school), Internships (RMTC model cited as effective), Track and farm-based experiential learning, Strong call for: Better visibility of careers, Social media as a recruitment tool, Clear pathways beyond “veterinarian only”. To address this, members discussed expanding internships, exposing students to equine careers earlier in school, strengthening partnerships with veterinary programs, and exploring ways to improve wages, housing access, and transportation options for entry-level workers. There was also interest in making horse-related careers more visible and understandable to people outside traditional agricultural backgrounds.

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

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