

8 May 2019

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Dean, and Ranking Member Lepore-Hagan

I am writing to you today in full support of HB 67, Veterinarian Continuing Education for Spay-Neuter Services. While I hoped to physically appear before the Committee today, I will be in Pennsylvania today on business.

I approach this Committee wearing several different “hats”. Each “hat” that I wear represents a different perspective and collectively, they allow me to uniquely share my personal opinions, my volunteer experiences, and my professional expertise. Not only am I an Animal Advocate, I sit on the Board of Directors of the Ashtabula County Animal Protective League (ACAPL) where I am the Vice President having served now for 11 years, am a Volunteer (part-time paid) Firefighter/Advanced EMT having served since the mid-1980s and am a tenured university Associate Professor. I am also a lifelong, current resident of Ohio.

As I am certain you will hear from other Animal Advocates, I will limit this portion of my testimony. It is my personal opinion, based on experience and empirical evidence, that the neutering of companion pets is vitally important to a community, to the pets’ guardian or owners, and to the pet itself. I am confident that other Advocates will speak to the many litters that can be produced by unneutered pets, the costs to the owners themselves and the reasons why pet guardians do not get animals neutered, health and behavioral concerns associated with an unneutered pet, and the ultimate costs borne by the community.

In my capacity at the ACAPL, I can speak to the constant influx of animals brought in by the community. The shelter is inundated by people bringing in a stray cat or lost dog in addition to those who relinquish custody of their pet. The vast majority of the dogs and cats that we receive are not neutered. While the “Return to Owner” rate is much higher for dogs than for cats, both rates are nevertheless very low, and as a result, the county shelter assumes responsibility for the animal – ultimately at a cost to taxpayers. Moreover, as we approach “Kitten Season”, we already know that we will soon be further inundated with “owner surrenders” of mother cats and their kittens. Ironically, these are the “lucky” cats and kittens as they will be neutered before going back into the community. Sadly, we have many cats – and quite a few dogs - that owners allow to roam freely during the day in the community that have not been neutered. An animal that has not been neutered is also more likely to stray when an opportunity presents. The animals may be hit by cars, attacked by other animals, or, in the case of females, come home impregnated, among other outcomes. Without more neutering services, these problems will not go away. While we can provide the education necessary to demonstrate the reasons as to “why” cat and dog owners should neuter their pets, without low cost neuter services, all the education in the world won’t change things. Additionally, I would add that, as a non-profit county shelter that is contracted by the City of Ashtabula and Ashtabula County to provide sheltering and adoption services in one of the poorest counties in the state, and not having an in-house veterinarian and having to contract out these services, should vets be able to earn CEUs by providing vitally necessary neutering surgery to an agency such as ours, this would go a long way to containing costs.

Another hat that I wear is that of Firefighter/Advance EMT. I will speak mostly to you in this capacity as I would imagine you are less likely to hear from this unique perspective. Under our fire and EMS certifications, we are also required to earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs). Having a full time and

demanding career in academia means that earning my own CEUs becomes challenging for a number of reasons. I would (not quite literally) worship the ground someone walked on that would make earning CEUs easier for me. Being required to meet certain content CEUs, in addition to difficulties associated with location and time of available CEUs, makes keeping current challenging. Although there are a number of on-line CEU programs which allow me to meet my certification obligations, the truth is, getting actual “hands on” work seems next-to-impossible. Should I be allowed to go into a disadvantaged community and provide a few hours of pro bono medical service, such as blood pressure checks, and even talking at a community center about health behaviors, I would feel that I am doing much more for my community than sitting in front of a laptop taking an on-line class or sitting through a lecture on “hypothermia” for the 15th time. The proposal before you allows veterinarians – who wish to voluntarily do so – provide a much needed service to a community that would benefit pets and their guardians *and the larger community* as well as address their professional need for CEUs and give them flexibility in earning those CEUs. The demands of providing veterinarian services, I imagine, would also make making educational requirements challenging due to the often lack of flexibility to fulfill certain requirements. In any case, I am certain that Stephen Covey (of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* fame) would claim this House Bill as a “win-win-win” – everybody “wins”.

Lastly, as an academic who teaches the only “Animals in Society” class in the Pennsylvania State University System (a 14 university system), I can speak to the empirical evidence of such phenomenon as the value of neuter surgery as well as the desire of pet owners to “do the right thing” with their pets which may conflict with their ability to provide what is necessary and the resulting cognitive dissonance. Much of what Animal Advocates will present to you is what is found in the empirical evidence: neuter surgery has significant beneficial effects for both pets and the humans that care for them.

Allowing veterinarians the option to choose to provide pro bono neuter surgery services as a way to earn a small percentage of required Continuing Education Units (CEUs or ConEds) is a win-win-win. Veterinarians “win” by being able to schedule ConEds based on their availability and allow them to provide a vital service to their local community and the companion animals that reside there; it allows shelters, rescues, and low-income families (who are most likely to utilize and benefit from services such as those provided by PetFix[®] or other Low Cost Spay/Neuter for income-eligible families) to receive a vital service; and lastly, the pets whose lives will be improved also “win”. Additionally, unwanted litters, which further exhaust the limited resources of shelters and agencies will be curtailed.

The simple truth is that this bill is about providing vital services largely to underserved, and often, poor, rural counties with limited resources and strained budgets, educating the community of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs which will reduce the stray cat population in a community, and offering veterinarians the extrinsic reward of earning CEUs and the intrinsic reward of improving the lives of animals (here, cats) which is why many likely went into veterinarian medicine in the first place.

I ask that you allow veterinarians to receive CEUs for voluntarily providing pro bono neuter surgery services. I thank you for your time and consideration.

Warmest Regards,

Irene Fiala

Irene Fiala, Ph.D., M.B.A.