



**One Health
Organization**
Pets & People, Healthy at Home.

STATEMENT OF ONE HEALTH ORGANIZATION IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 268

November 11, 2024

Good afternoon, Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Landis, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and the members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. My name is Dr. Anna M. van Heeckeren and I thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony of Senate Bill 268, Establish veterinarian telehealth visit requirements, procedures. I am the Founder, President & CEO of One Health Organization, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded in 2008 and registered in the State of Ohio.

I have been an Ohio licensed veterinarian since 1993 after earning a Bachelor's degree in biology and a Master's in genetics. I am a member of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Ohio Veterinary Medical Association, and Cleveland Academy of Veterinary Medicine. I have volunteered at the local, state, and national levels related to veterinary medicine since 2002. As a veterinarian, I am a public health professional serving people with animals needing veterinary care.

Nonprofits help people access veterinary care

Many pets are relinquished to animal shelters because they cannot access veterinary care. Nonprofit organizations caring for animals, such as shelters, are beginning to understand the importance of keeping pets in loving homes. A critical way to do this is to increase access to veterinary care for everyone responsible for caring for animals.

One Health Organization serves people living with dogs and cats to help them get the care they need. Our programs provide information about veterinary care, financial assistance to income-qualified individuals living in Northeast Ohio to pay for veterinary care, and other resources to help people access the care they need for their pets and themselves.

As a leader in providing increased access to veterinary care, One Health Organization works with small animal veterinary practitioners willing to accept payment through One Health Organization and serves low-income pet owners who want and need veterinary care for their dogs and cats. Our work continued during the COVID pandemic given the

decisive and positive action of Ohio's government leadership that veterinarians are essential workers.

Shortage of veterinarians in the US and Ohio threatens public safety

A statement released on March 2024 by the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges indicates that there are "significant shortages of veterinarians ... across all sectors of professional activity in all levels of specialization." These shortages include veterinarians in private practice (i.e., those treating pets) and food animal medicine (i.e., those treating farm animals raised for human consumption).

Also, the Veterinary Care Accessibility Project states, "Throughout the country, millions of people and their pets do not have adequate access to veterinary care."

There is a shortage of veterinarians in food animal medicine to keep our food supply safe. Seventeen (17) Ohio counties are recognized by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture within the US Department of Agriculture for Type II shortages. This means shortages are in private practice and rural area food animal medicine. To encourage veterinarians with student loan debt to practice in rural areas, Ohio uses the Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program to entice them to practice in an area of need.

The veterinary shortage impacts many pet owners. Veterinarians can only offer services to a limited number of clients. Some are not taking new clients, and some clinics can only offer an appointment many weeks in the future.

Zoonotic diseases are those that can be spread from animals to people. Veterinary care of animals, which includes pets and livestock, helps prevent the spread of these diseases. Without adequate veterinary care for animals, people suffer.

Not all veterinarians can provide in-person veterinary care

A colleague of mine with Parkinson's disease and another with increasing physical disabilities can no longer practice veterinary medicine in a clinic or people's homes. Allowing disabled veterinarians to provide telehealth services can help ease the backlog of veterinary medicine.

Telehealth helps increase access to veterinary care

During the pandemic, veterinary medicine opened the doors to telehealth, which the American Veterinary Medical Association defines as the "use of technology to remotely gather and deliver health information, advice, education, and patient care." They also define different categories of telehealth, including telemedicine which "includes the

delivery of information specific to a particular patient and requires that a Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR) be established.”

Ideally, veterinarians physically examine an animal to provide medical care. In reality, this is not always possible. This is because of the limited number of veterinarians in general private and food animal practice, and few veterinarians provide mobile services. This impacts people living in Ohio like retired nurse Frances who is homebound, Joe who lacks access to the internet, Susan who lacks reliable transportation, and Frank who has a disability.

At One Health Organization, I hear many stories from people seeking urgent veterinary care for their pets. One case is Karen, who owned a very large dog named Gus. She couldn't lift him in her car because Gus was too big. She couldn't find any transportation for her ill dog and badly wanted veterinary care for her beloved Gus. If telehealth were available, Karen could have contacted a veterinarian to determine what could be done to prevent Gus from suffering and relieve her conscience.

Telehealth is growing in popularity in the veterinary field

1. Veterinarians can receive training in providing telehealth services
2. The Veterinary Virtual Care Association (VVCA) is an international membership group guiding veterinarians who provide telehealth services
3. A virtual Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship is approved in the AZ, CA, DC, FL, ID, VA, VT, and NJ
4. The American Association of Veterinary State Boards created guidelines for the appropriate use of telehealth technologies in veterinary practice

Telehealth provided by trained veterinarians helps people care for their animals

In proposed Senate Bill 268, the following statement is retained, “...the veterinarian shall have seen the patient recently and also shall be acquainted personally with the keeping and care of the patient...” This requirement reflects a base requirement for the Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship.

In Conclusion

Expanding the definition of the Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship to include telehealth is one important way to increase access to veterinary care for more people caring for animals.

Telehealth is important for human health and safety and animal health and welfare.

It is imperative that Senate Bill 268 Pass.