

Testimony of Dr. Zeke Zekoff, DVM, in Support of Ohio Senate Bill 268

Chair and Members of the Senate Agriculture Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of Ohio Senate Bill 268, a measure that can transform veterinary care across Ohio by enabling telehealth services for our pets and pet owners. My name is Dr. Zeke Zekoff. With over 41 years in veterinary medicine, including 35 years running my clinic in a suburban area of Cincinnati, and experience working in a community clinic that serves economically disadvantaged families, I have seen firsthand the challenges and gaps in access to care. I am also the founder of a nonprofit that supports hundreds of animal shelters and rescues across Ohio and up and down the Midwest.

The pandemic taught us the value of telehealth in human healthcare, and now it's time to extend those benefits to veterinary care. Telehealth is not a replacement for in-person visits; it is a complementary tool that can help us reach pet owners who might otherwise be unable to access timely care.

Telehealth Increases Accessibility and Convenience

Imagine a pet owner in a rural area or someone with limited mobility facing an emergency situation in the middle of the night. For these pet owners, getting to a veterinary clinic might be difficult or even impossible. With telehealth, a licensed veterinarian can assess the situation remotely, potentially preventing unnecessary suffering and reducing the stress of long-distance travel or costly emergency care.

This service is especially crucial for elderly pet owners, those without transportation, or busy families who cannot afford to wait for a traditional appointment. Telehealth bridges the gap, providing immediate guidance to address urgent health concerns and, in many cases, alleviating fears that can come from uncertain symptoms.

Affordable and Efficient Healthcare for All

For many Ohioans, the cost of veterinary care is a barrier, particularly for routine follow-ups or minor ailments. Telehealth offers a more affordable option for pet owners, making necessary care within reach for those on a limited budget. By reducing unnecessary in-person visits, telehealth can keep healthcare costs down, ensuring that even Ohioans with economic challenges can keep their pets healthy.

For example, managing chronic conditions like arthritis or diabetes requires regular monitoring, which can be conveniently and cost-effectively handled through telehealth. This option not only saves time and money but also ensures that pets receive consistent, quality care, improving their health and quality of life.

Leveraging Modern IT Tools for Complementary Care

The advent and use of modern IT tools make telehealth an ideal complement to traditional veterinary services. Advanced video conferencing, secure data transmission, and digital health record systems mean veterinarians can seamlessly monitor pets' health remotely. From video check-ups to digital file sharing, these tools provide veterinarians with real-time access to information, allowing for an efficient and comprehensive assessment without the need for an immediate in-person visit.

It's important to emphasize that telehealth is not designed to replace hands-on veterinary care. Instead, it serves as an accessible extension of the clinic, offering initial guidance and follow-up consultations when appropriate, while determining if an in-person visit is necessary. The convenience of telehealth, powered by modern technology, allows us to respond more effectively to the needs of pet owners and provide a quicker, more flexible option for care.

Supporting Ohio's Animal Shelters and Rescues

Ohio's animal shelters and rescues operate on limited budgets and often struggle to cover healthcare costs. Telehealth could be a game-changer, reducing in-person veterinary costs for these organizations, allowing them to care for more animals, and helping prevent economic euthanasia. Shelters could consult with veterinarians remotely, improving animal health and increasing adoption rates as animals are kept healthier and adoption-ready.

Addressing Concerns and Ensuring Oversight

Understandably, some may worry about whether telehealth can meet the quality standards of in-person care. Let me be clear: ***telehealth is not a replacement for hands-on veterinary care. It is designed to be a complementary service that offers initial assessments, triages urgent cases, and provides follow-up care for non-emergent situations. With clear regulations and oversight, we can ensure that telehealth is a safe, effective, and well-regulated tool that enhances our current veterinary care systems.***

In closing, veterinary telehealth is an innovative, responsible step forward in making veterinary care more accessible, affordable, and efficient for all Ohioans. With your support of Senate Bill 268, Ohio can lead the way in modernizing veterinary care, providing our pet owners with greater options for keeping their beloved animals healthy and safe. The doctor is ready to see you now—let's be ready to embrace the future of veterinary care for Ohio's pets.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am open to any questions you may have from me.

***SURGICAL CASES THAT WOULD HAVE BENEFITTED FROM
TELEHEALTH ASSESSMENT EARLIER THAN WHAT YOU SEE***

