



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

February 28, 2024

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

SB900

Higher Education – Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program – Eligibility

FAVORABLE

The Humane Society of the United States, on behalf of our members and supporters in Maryland, urges a favorable report on SB900.

Veterinarians are facing historic challenges on several fronts as the profession struggles to provide access to care to animals in Maryland and nationwide. Staffing shortages are ubiquitous, with a dearth of veterinarians and veterinary technicians available to fill open positions. A recent study by Mars Veterinary Health found that there is a 16 percent shortage of veterinarians needed to meet national animal care needs and, if the current trends continue, as many as 75 million pets nationwide will be without veterinary care by 2030. In Maryland, that has resulted in pet owners waiting weeks to get veterinary appointments for their pets and the situation is even more dire in rural areas where clinics finding it even harder to attract veterinary professionals for open positions.

Related to the problems created by staffing shortages are the mounting mental health challenges facing veterinary professionals. Daily juggling of packed clinic schedules, empathy for families with limited funds for necessary care, emergency situations, and euthanasia appointments can lead to burnout and compassion fatigue. Even before the pandemic, it was well documented that veterinarians' mental health was suffering and national statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that one out of every six veterinarians has considered suicide and male vets are 1.6 times more likely and female vets are 2.4 times more likely to die by suicide than the general population.

Finally, and most pertinent for this legislation, is the fact that most veterinary professionals face huge financial burdens including sizeable student loans upon graduation from veterinary school. The average veterinary student debt is currently about \$200,000 at graduation and this doesn't take into account other debt they have accumulated from undergraduate degrees and living expenses. In some cases, veterinary professionals can expect to be paying off their student loans for their entire career and in many cases this impacts their decision whether to practice in rural areas or for shelters or nonprofits, where income levels for staff may be lower.

While this veterinary crisis is impacting all pet owners and caregivers, the impact is most profound on our shelters and rescues. Shelters that are fortunate enough to have a staff position for an on-staff veterinarian struggle to attract and retain qualified candidates, and shelters that rely on volunteer hours from veterinarians are having an increasingly difficult time finding volunteers. The lack of veterinarians providing support to our shelters impacts not just shelter animals, it impacts constituents and local government budgets.

Increasingly, desperate pet owners are looking to shelters and rescues to help with veterinary procedures, from vaccinations to spay/neuter to more complicated diagnostics and care. Our shelters strive to provide these services but must prioritize vet services for the animals in their care. Without adequate staffing or volunteer practitioners, shelters cannot meet the needs from community. This leaves pets uncared for or surrendered to shelters in desperation.

The lack of staff and volunteer vets also has a fiscal impact on local government budgets. When pets get surrendered, the shelter must now pay for the daily care and feeding for that animal until a new home can be found. Shelters also end up paying private veterinary rates for procedures needed for surrendered animals and shelter animals.

This is a moderate, fiscally constrained proposal that uses an existing program to streamline administration costs. The bill simply adds a new category to the incredibly successful Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program (LARP). The LARP program is already capably administered by the Maryland Higher Education Commission, which has proven its ability to successfully add new categories of recipients in past years. The recipient pool is constrained in two ways; both by the types of shelters or rescues that qualify, and by the number of hours of service provided.

This is a modest investment for a significant service. There's a critical shortage of qualified veterinary professionals and that shortage is expected to get worse over time. The investment in funding this program is countered by the cost-saving for local governments in ensuring shelters and rescues can continue to provide care to people and pets without outsourcing care or having to accept surrendered animals because their owners could not receive care.

This is a life-saving and valuable bill. We urge a favorable report on SB 900.