



**January 24, 2024**  
**Judicial Proceedings Committee**

**SB 157**

***Domestic Animals - Penalties for Abandonment and Microchip Requirements for Dogs***  
**LETTER OF INFORMATION**

On behalf of The Humane Society of the United States, Maryland Votes for Animals, and the Professional Animal Workers of Maryland, we wanted to provide the committee with informational testimony on SB 157, *Domestic Animals - Penalties for Abandonment and Microchip Requirements for Dogs*.

We deeply appreciate the sponsor's attention to this issue and his intent behind the legislation. We are not taking a position on SB157 but wanted to share some concerns with the bill as written, as well as offer a few suggestions for the committee as the legislation is considered.

While we understand and sympathize the intent of the bill, and do not want to see pets abandoned, this is an issue that is unlikely to be curbed with a legislative fix as often there are deeper issues at play in these unfortunate situations. The groups listed above cannot support increased penalties for misdemeanor animal offenses. Disparities in services and resources that people rely on are often a result of a larger systemic issue including access to affordable and attainable veterinary care, availability of stable housing that welcomes pets, and ability to rehome or relinquish pets when many of our shelters are at capacity with length wait times for owner-requested surrenders. These issues are often interconnected and increased punitive measures are not the answer to these complex issues.

Regarding the microchip requirements in SB 157, studies show there are many benefits to microchipping your pet. Pets with chips are much more likely to be returned to their owners than those who lack one acting as an essential backup by providing an extra level of protection in case your pet loses their collar or tags. While microchips are often effective and can help reunite pets with their owners after being separated or lost, we do have concerns about some of the microchipping provisions in the bill.

First, while some county/municipal shelters have the means to microchip every animal that is returned to their owner or adopted out, that is not always the case due to funding and/or staffing constraints. To support the requirements laid out in SB 157, additional funding would

be necessary for the purchasing of chips which on average cost \$10 per animal, scanners which typically cost between \$250-\$300 per scanner plus regular maintenance costs, and staffing expenses to ensure staff are properly trained and have the time and ability to safely implant the chips.

Furthermore, the historical evidence on the compliance rates for dog licensing indicate that a microchip mandate will likely prove ineffective. For decades states and municipalities across the country have mandated dogs be licensed locally. Yet state compliance rates typically peak at about 20%, even with regular reminders and warnings to residents with pets. In fact, a 2019 report on pet licensing in the United States found that since 2014 only 13% of pet owners license their animals. These low compliance rates suggest that replacing a licensing mandate with a microchipping mandate will not improve outcomes or accomplish the author's intended goal—especially one that does not include a comprehensive access and affordability plan. In addition, the rate of owners updating the chip information when they move, change numbers, or transfer ownership of the animal would likely be similarly low.

Instead of a mandate to microchip every dog where ownership is transferred, we recommend building a pathway to offer residents completely free microchip implantation through community clinics, the ability for veterinary technicians and other qualified individuals to implant the microchip and registration for residents. A good example of a program is out of San Antonio, Texas. The city now requires microchips, but also made them free for all residents of the city and regularly do microchipping events and "Check Your Chip" events to make sure the information is up to date. Their animal control officers can also administer microchips.

We also recommend the state not designate the microchip implantation procedure as a practice of veterinary medicine or require a veterinary practitioner to implant the chip. This procedure has become widespread at animal shelters and humane societies and narrowing the ability to implant a microchip to only a veterinary practitioner will diminish access and increase costs to pet owners, as often these tasks can be delegated persons with appropriate training working under the direct or indirect supervision of a licensed veterinarian.

Finally, as stated in Section E, the 20-year record keeping requirement also could be problematic as some companies have made registration confusing and free options are often obscured by sales pitches for paid updates. It puts the burden on individuals, and there may be complications if a company goes out of business.

We appreciate Sen. Ellis' interest in this issue and look forward to working with the sponsor and the committee to find productive and effective ways to keep people and pets together and protect animals from abandonment.

Sincerely,

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