



Maryland Veterinary Medical Association

Tuesday January 25, 2022

SB 67 - Animal Welfare - Declawing Cats - Prohibited Acts

OPPOSE

Chairman Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan and Members of the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee,

Established in 1886, the Maryland Veterinary Medical Association (MDVMA) is a community of dynamic professionals who are passionate about veterinary medicine and improving the lives of those it touches. MDVMA's mission is to serve as a leading resource for the veterinary community through communication, education, representation, and support for the advancement of animal and public health in Maryland.

Senate Bill 67 would prohibit a person from performing a declawing procedure on a cat unless the person is a veterinary practitioner (licensed and registered veterinarian) and the procedure is necessary for a "therapeutic purpose". MDVMA surveyed members to gather information on the current practice of the declawing procedure in Maryland. Results from the membership survey illustrate the following conclusions:

- The number of declaws performed in veterinary hospitals in Maryland is 3 per year, on average.
- Over 90% of the veterinarians that do perform declaw will only do so after counseling the pet owner about the details and risks of surgery and offering surgical alternatives, or for extenuating circumstances but not simply on an owner's request.
- Veterinarians that do not perform declaw cited lack of demand, hospital policy, and never learned to perform the procedure.
- Practitioners who have been practicing less than 11 years said they do not perform declaw and/or did not learn the procedure in veterinary college.

To further understand the current practice of declaw in Maryland, MDVMA actively inquired with cat shelters across the state and reliable internet adoption platform "Petfinder" to determine the universe adoptable cats that have been declawed in the fall. To further validate the data we were collecting, members of the MDVMA called every single cat shelter in Maryland to confirm pet finder's accuracy. As of January 21, 2022 there were 32 adoptable cats that have been declawed of the 5,800 cats available for adoption in the Delmarva area, or roughly 0.5% of the observed universe of adoptable cats within 100 mile radius of Annapolis (See Attachment 1).

Over the years, the veterinary profession's approach to these procedures has changed drastically. Declawing is rare and may occur after serious counseling with owners about alternatives. Generally, the cat declaw procedure is viewed as a last resort effort to keep a feline companion in the home rather than a shelter. Practitioners discuss declawing concerns with clients and use post-operative medications for pain in cats that would otherwise be displaced from their owners.

To further illustrate this shift in the profession's approach to declaw, **The American Veterinarian Medical Association (AVMA)** recently amended their position on feline declawing in 2020 and reaffirmed it in 2022 (Attachment 2):

"The AVMA discourages the declawing (onychectomy) of cats as an elective procedure and supports non-surgical alternatives to the procedure. The AVMA respects the veterinarian's right to use professional judgment when deciding how to best protect their individual patients' health and welfare. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the veterinarian to counsel the owner about the natural scratching behavior of cats, the alternatives to surgery, as well as the details of the procedure itself and subsequent potential complications. Onychectomy is a surgical amputation and if performed, multi-modal perioperative pain management must be utilized."

Currently drafted, HB 22 offers a narrow exception to the ban on declaw. Veterinarian practitioners would be able to perform the procedure if, and only if, it is necessary for a "Therapeutic purpose." On page 2 of HB 22, beginning on line 22, "Therapeutic Purpose" is defined as:

(G-1) (1) "THERAPEUTIC PURPOSE" MEANS TO ADDRESS A PHYSICAL OR MEDICAL CONDITION THAT COMPROMISES THE HEALTH OR WELL-BEING OF AN ANIMAL.

(2) "THERAPEUTIC PURPOSE" DOES NOT INCLUDE COSMETIC OR AESTHETIC REASONS OR REASONS OF CONVENIENCE IN THE KEEPING OR HANDLING OF THE ANIMAL.

The limited exception to perform the procedure outlined in HB 22 is defined without regard to a veterinarian's professional judgement or a human health component. Many of our members do not perform these procedures at all; however, MDVMA objects to legislating the clinical judgement of practitioners.

MDVMA strongly supports preserving the human- feline bond wherever possible. Consideration of human health circumstances should be included in the "therapeutic definition." If a cat's claws are causing injury or illness to a person, then MDVMA practitioners advocate for keeping the cat in the home, and in the rarest of cases, a declawing procedure may be required to do so. Otherwise, the cat risks being surrendered to a shelter and potentially euthanized under those circumstances.

The profession's national shift to counsel owners on the declaw procedure and offer alternatives, and the fact that there is only a small universe of cats affected by declaw in Maryland, make this bill unnecessary. MDVMA's primary concern is that this legislation sets new precedent in limiting the judgement of veterinary practitioners to operate within an established veterinary client patient relationship.

MDVMA has shared this perspective with the bill's sponsor and proponents, offered non legislative solutions to address their concerns, and will continue to engage in discussions on this issue. Unfortunately, as currently drafted, MDVMA opposes this legislation.

The Maryland Veterinary Medical Association Respectfully Urges an Unfavorable Report

Contacts:

Marisa Francis, MDVMA Executive Director – (717) – 480 – 8376

Moira Cyphers & Josh Howe, Compass Government Relations – (443)-343-7143

Attachment 1
MDVMA – Opposition Testimony to SB 67



100-mile radius around State Circle, Annapolis

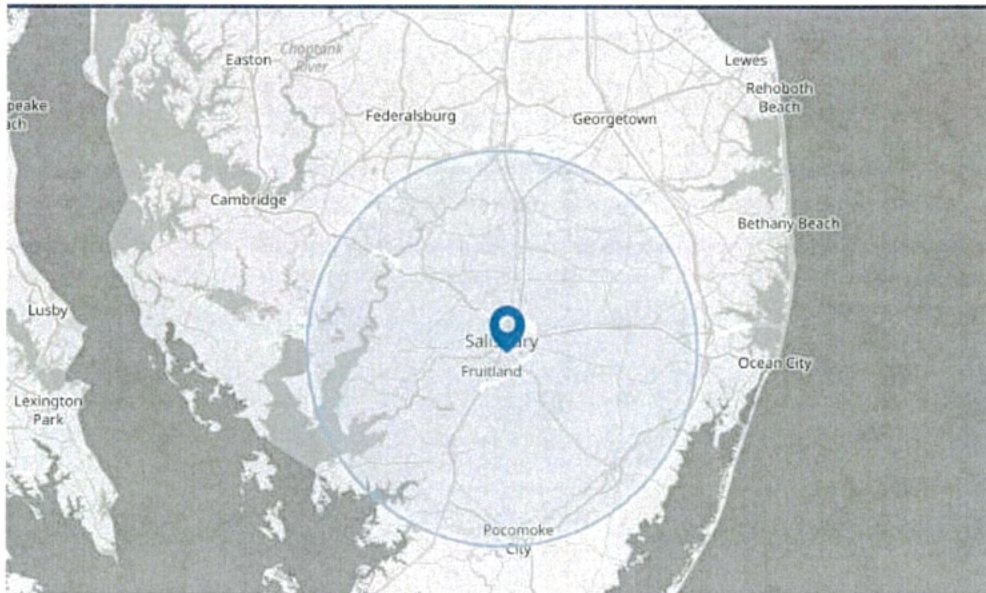
Searched Friday, January 21, 2022

5,800 adoptable cats

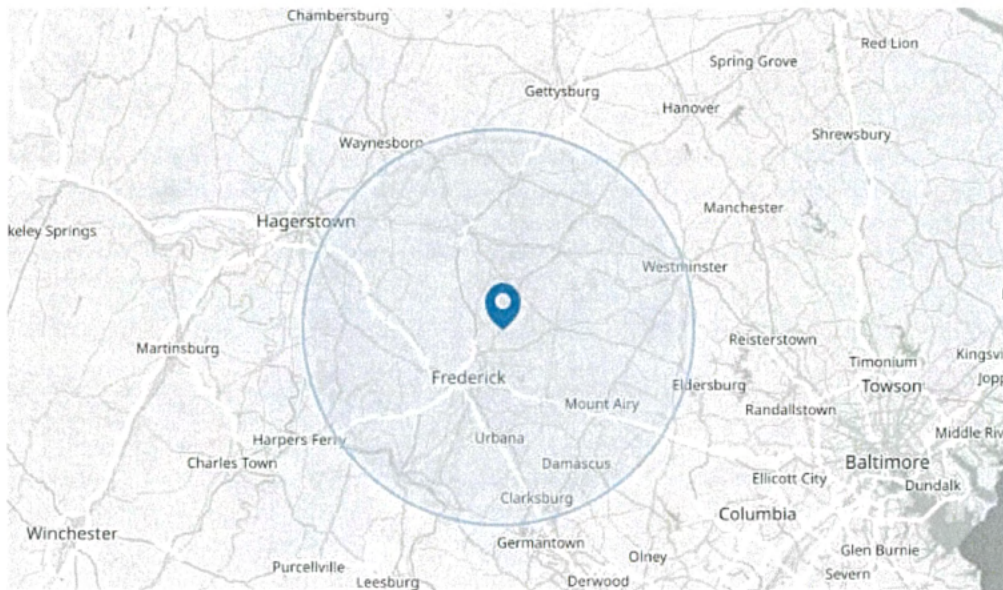
32 are Declawed (0.5%)

Many from different States

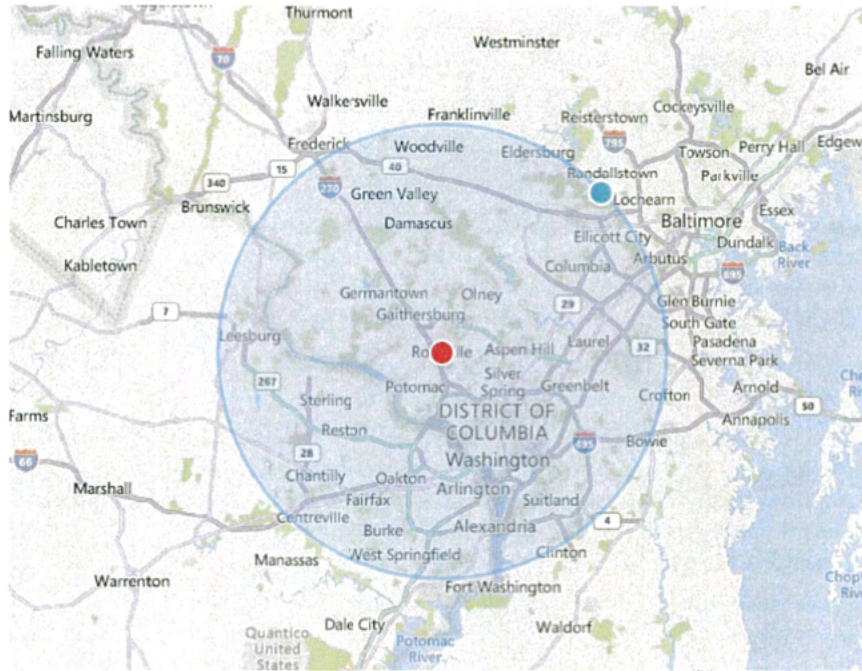
<https://www.petfinder.com/search/cats-for-adoption/us/md/annapolis/?attribute%5B0%5D=Declawed>



20–25-mile radius around Salisbury
 68 adoptable cats
1 is declawed and located in Maryland (1.47%)

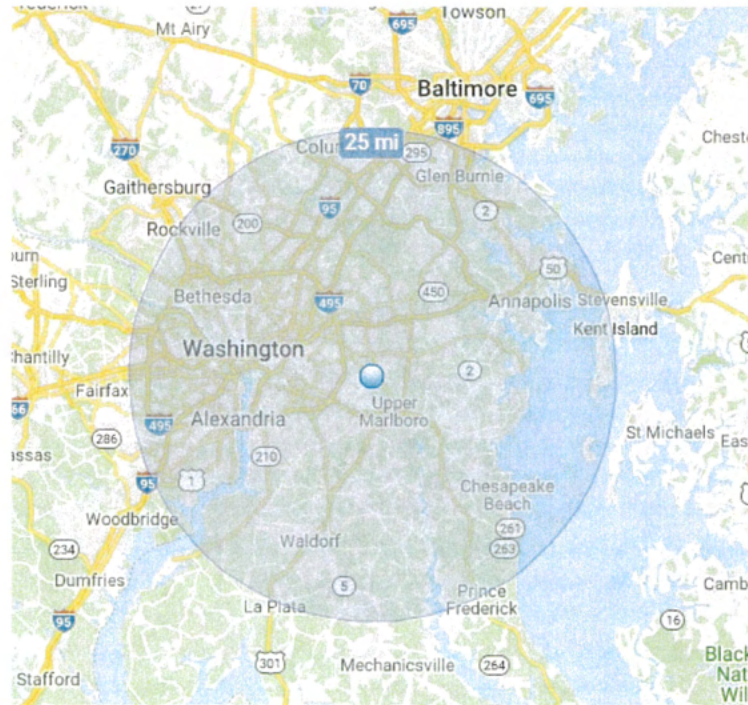


20–25-mile radius around Walkersville
 423 adoptable cats
 8 are declawed
 5 located in Pennsylvania
3 located in Maryland (0.71%)



25-mile radius around Rockville
1,300 adoptable cats

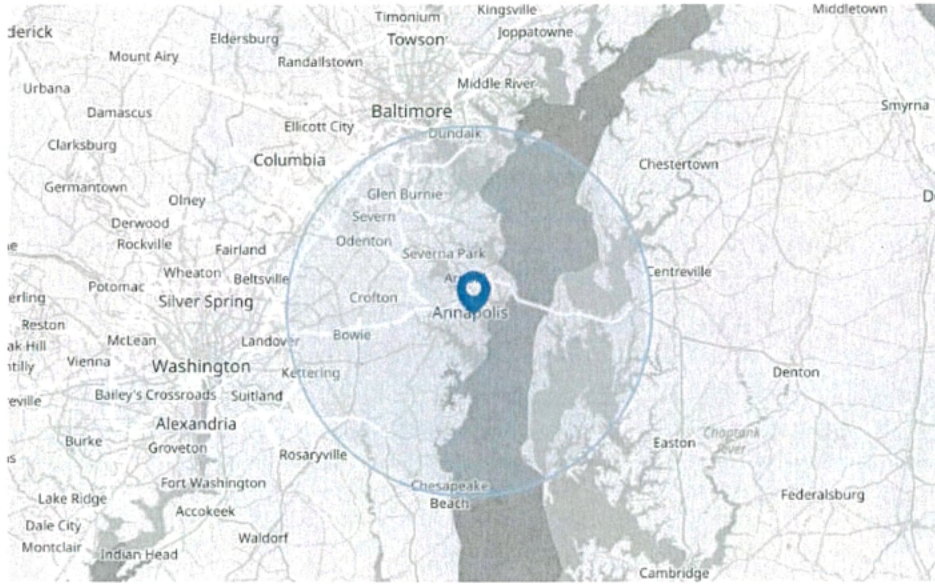
3 are declawed and located in Virginia (0.23%)



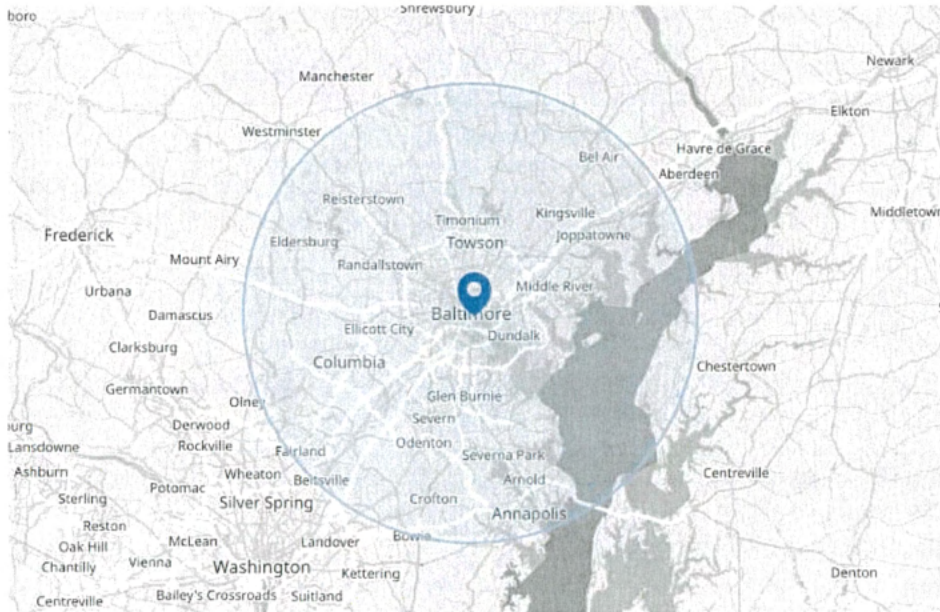
25-mile radius around Upper Marlboro
1,200 adoptable cats

5 are declawed (0.42%)

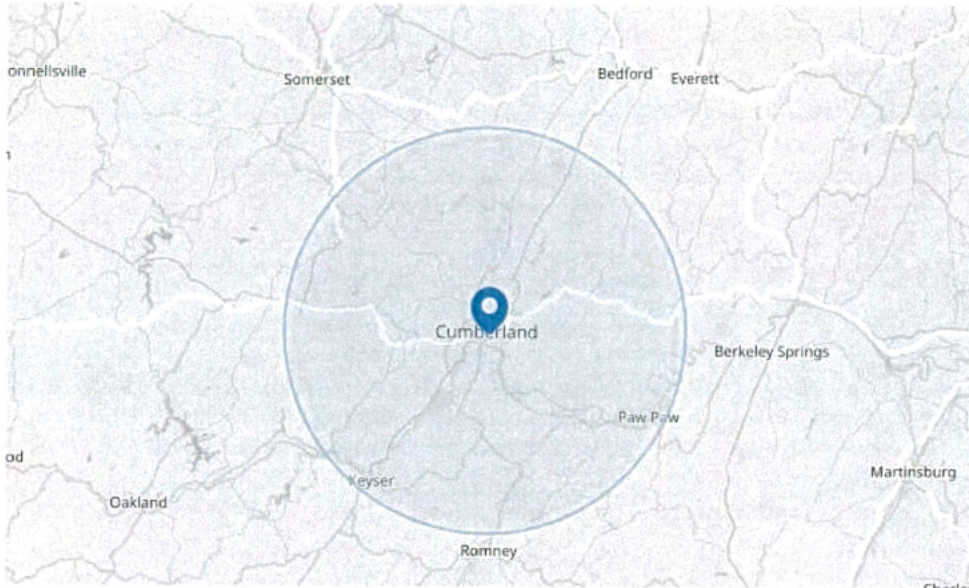
All 5 located in Maryland



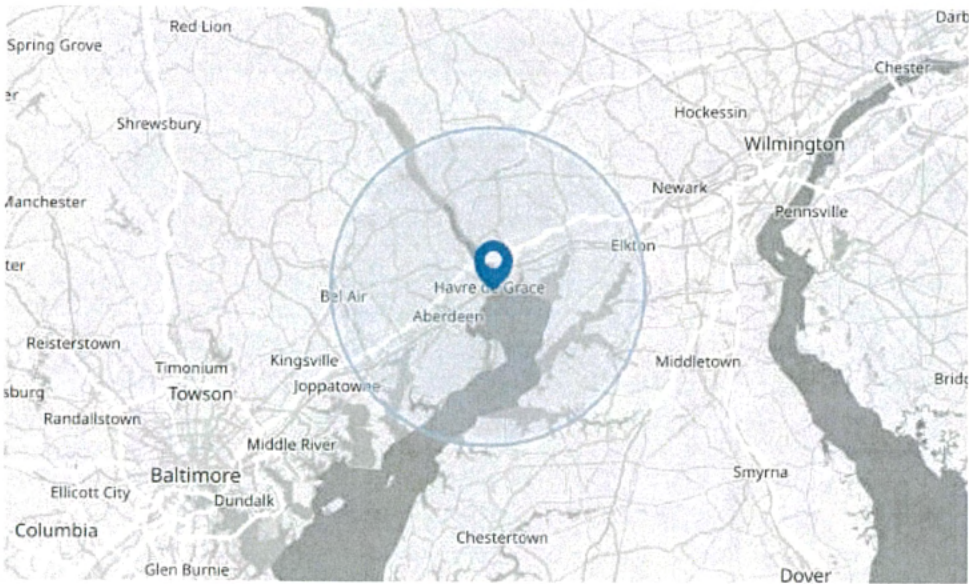
20–25-mile radius around Annapolis
 710 adoptable cats
3 are declawed (0.422%)
 All 3 located in Maryland



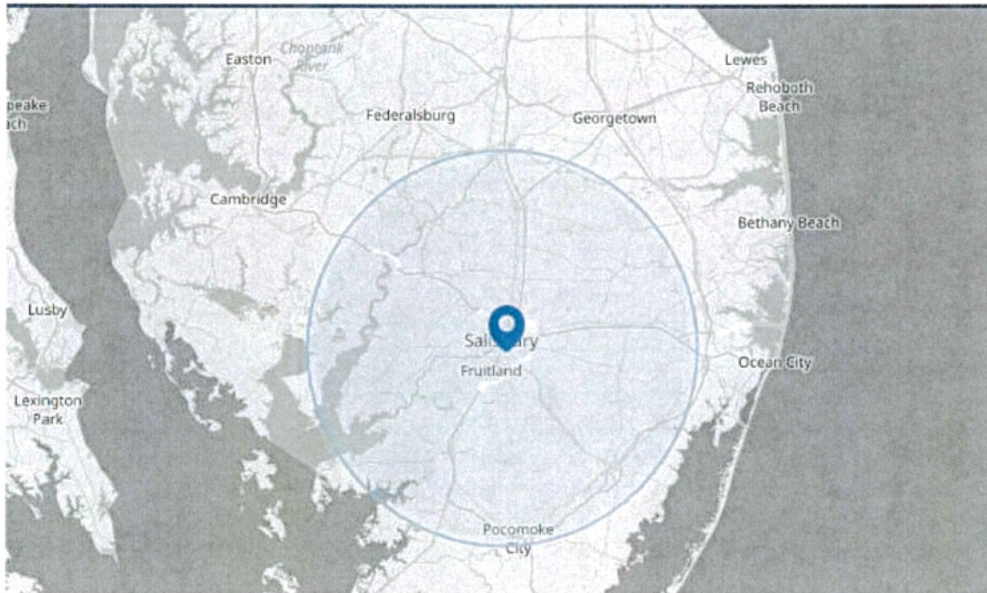
20–25-mile radius around Baltimore
 867 adoptable cats
3 are declawed (0.35%)
 All 3 located in Maryland



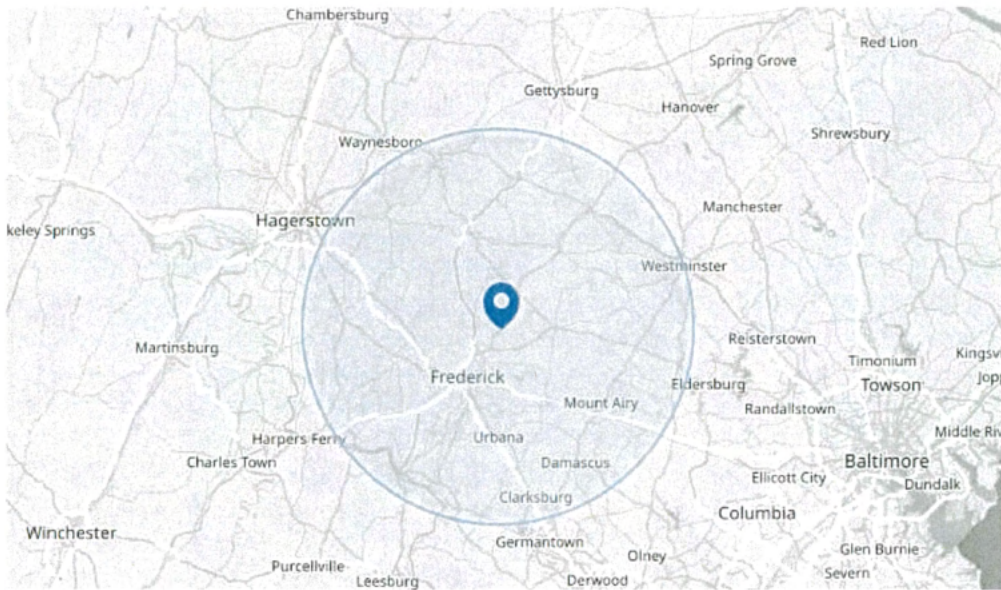
20–25-mile radius around Cumberland
 246 adoptable cats
0 are declawed



10–15-mile radius around Havre de Grace
 23 adoptable cats
0 are declawed



20–25-mile radius around Salisbury
 68 adoptable cats
1 is declawed and located in Maryland (1.47%)



20–25-mile radius around Walkersville
 423 adoptable cats
 8 are declawed
 5 located in Pennsylvania
3 located in Maryland (0.71%)



MDVMA Attachment #2

January 17, 2022

Ms. Marisa Francis
Executive Director
Maryland Veterinary Medical Association
8574 Paxton Street
Hummelstown, PA 17036

Re: MD HB 22, concerning Animal Welfare – Declawing Cats – Prohibited Acts

Dear Ms. Francis:

I am writing to express the American Veterinary Medical Association's opposition to HB 22, which would prohibit the declawing of cats and impose disciplinary actions, including the revocation of a license, for performing the procedure. Although the AVMA discourages onychectomy (declawing) of cats as an elective procedure and encourages veterinarians to counsel their clients about non-surgical alternatives, we have grave concerns about legislative and regulatory actions that remove the professional judgment of veterinarians in determining when to perform specific veterinary procedures.

Good animal health and welfare is supported by the veterinarian's ability to apply professional judgment within the context of the veterinarian-client-patient relationship

The adoption of HB 22 would circumvent the professional judgment of Maryland veterinarians and disrupt the veterinarian-client-patient relationship, which has long been the foundation of veterinary medical practice. Best health and welfare outcomes for veterinary patients, clients, and the public require that decisions involving the diagnosis and treatment of veterinary patients—including the performance of surgical procedures, such as declawing—be made by the animal's veterinarian in consultation with the animal's owner. This ensures that each animal receives the best possible care that is uniquely tailored to its needs. Veterinarians must retain authority to exercise professional judgment in making clinical recommendations that are in the best interest of their patients.

Viable alternatives to legislative and regulatory action

With respect to onychectomy, and as an alternative to legislative and/or regulatory action, the AVMA strongly recommends that veterinarians thoroughly educate cat owners about the normal scratching behaviors of cats and that they support their clients in exploring and implementing alternatives to declawing.

The AVMA assists veterinarians in their efforts by providing educational resources (example attached) that can help them communicate effectively with their clients. If such alternatives fail, with a potential consequence being the relinquishment and/or euthanasia of the cat, then onychectomy becomes the option of last resort. These statements are supported by a survey of veterinary practices that revealed most veterinarians recommend nonsurgical alternatives to onychectomy and that veterinarians who perform the surgery do so infrequently, at a rate of one procedure or fewer per month.¹

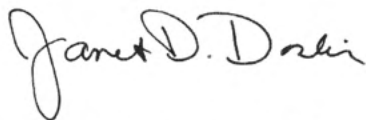
Pain management and patient outcomes

Veterinarians recognize that onychectomy is a major surgery. Perioperative pain management is necessary and required for this procedure. Just as for other surgical procedures, advancements in knowledge and technology mean that onychectomy procedures have evolved. Contemporary approaches to onychectomy have resulted in fewer surgical complications and better patient outcomes.

Declawing is a controversial procedure; however, we speak for the profession in voicing our opposition to HB 22 and ask that every effort be made to ensure that veterinarians retain their ability to apply their professional judgment when it comes to medical and surgical decisions that impact the health and welfare of their patients. Veterinarians have an obligation to consider the unique needs of the patient that is in front of them and a duty to inform their clients of a given procedure's risks, benefits, and alternatives. Declawing is neither unique nor singular in that regard. We thank you for supporting our patients, their owners, and our profession by protecting the ability of veterinarians to act in their patients' best interests.

For questions regarding this letter, please contact Dr. Kendall Houlihan, Assistant Director, Division of Animal Welfare, at 847-285-6685 or khoulihan@avma.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janet D. Donlin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Janet D. Donlin, DVM, CAE
Executive Vice President and Chief Executive Officer

¹ Ruch-Gallie R, Hellyer PW, Schoenfeld-Tacher R, et al. Survey of practices and perceptions regarding feline onychectomy among private practitioners. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2016;249(3):291-298.



Scratching is a normal behavior of cats. It conditions the claws, serves as a visual and scent territorial marker, allows the cat to defend itself, and provides healthy muscle engagement through stretching. In many cases, a cat can be trained to scratch only appropriate surfaces. However, a cat's excessive or inappropriate scratching behavior can become destructive or cause injury to people in the home.

ALTERNATIVE TRAINING AND MANAGEMENT OPTIONS

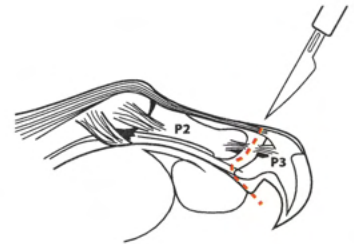
- Providing appropriate scratching surfaces, such as dedicated posts and boards that are tall enough to encourage full stretching. What constitutes an attractive surface or location varies by cat, so don't be afraid to get creative! Scenting with catnip may help too.
- Frequent nail trims - every 1-2 weeks
- Nail caps - replaced every 4-6 weeks
- Positive reinforcement training, beginning with kitten kindergarten if available
- Pheromone sprays and/or plug-ins
- Discourage use of inappropriate surfaces by attaching sticky tape or tinfoil
- Punishment is not an effective deterrent

WHEN THE ALTERNATIVES AREN'T ENOUGH

When undesirable scratching is not able to be successfully managed, or a member of the household is immunocompromised with a higher risk of health complications as a result of accidental scratches, declawing may be the only alternative to relinquishment or euthanasia. While not a first choice, nor a minor procedure, if properly performed declawing may allow a pet cat to remain in an otherwise good home.

Declawing is the surgical amputation of a cat's claws and the third toe bones to which they are attached.

Most cats will still exhibit scratching behavior after declawing. If performed, this elective orthopedic surgery requires general anesthesia and comprehensive pain management under the care of an experienced veterinarian. Like any major surgical procedure, possible complications include short- and long-term pain, bleeding, infection, and wound reopening.



MAKE A THOUGHTFUL CHOICE

Because elective declawing is performed for the benefit of the owner rather than the cat, the procedure remains controversial. The decision to have a cat declawed should be carefully considered in consultation with your veterinarian. Declawing should only be performed after reasonable behavior modification attempts and alternatives have been exhausted. Declawed cats should not be allowed outdoors, unless they are under direct supervision.

To learn more visit avma.org/declaw