

**Tuesday, January 25, 2022**

Written Testimony of the  
**Maryland Veterinary Medical Association**



Prepared for the  
**Maryland General Assembly**  
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

**Re: SB0067 Animal Welfare – Declawing Cats – Prohibited Acts**

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January 20, 2022

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

**Re: MD SB 67, concerning Animal Welfare – Declawing Cats – Prohibited Acts**

Dear Ms. Francis:

I am writing to express the American Veterinary Medical Association's opposition to SB 67, 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 SB 67 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.<sup>1</sup>

### ***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 SB 67 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](mailto: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

<sup>1</sup>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.



## Important things to consider when making the decision **DECLAW...OR NOT?**

**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

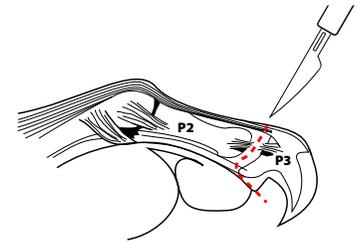
- Providing appropriate scratching surfaces, such as dedicated posts and boards that are tall enough to encourage full stretching. What constitutes an attractive surface or location varies by cat, so don't be afraid to get creative! Scenting with catnip may help too.
- Frequent nail trims - every 1-2 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](https://www.avma.org/declaw)

Lawrence James Giebel DVM  
Quince Orchard Veterinary Hospital  
11910 Darnestown Road  
Gaithersburg, MD 20878

January 21, 2022

Re: SB 67 Animal Welfare - Declawing Cats - Prohibited Acts – OPPOSE

Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee,

I submit my testimony as a long-time veterinary practitioner. It is my clinical experience that removing a cat's toenails using a Surgical Laser can greatly increase the opportunity for better health and happiness of both the cat and the human in "Special Situations", without requiring surrender of the cat or causing extreme pain or suffering for the cat.

I consider removing a cat's toe nails as a "Special Needs Procedure". When a human "needs" his companion for the human's mental and/or physical health, but has a "Special Condition" such as an immunocompromised disease or anticoagulant issues like lymphedema, the human's Doctor may encourage his patient to get rid of his cat because of the danger of cat scratch disease<sup>1</sup> or bleeding issues. That solution can result in a miserable human and a miserable cat that may be difficult to rehome or surrendered to a shelter. The likelihood of that beloved pet facing euthanasia at that point is incredibly high: 56% of dogs and 71% of cats surrendered to shelters are euthanized.<sup>2</sup>

As a veterinarian, I took an oath to uphold animal life and preserve and protect the public health of humans. Performed rarely and safely under the updated guidelines of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) cat declawing should be a procedure of last resort.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/diseases/cat-scratch.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.americanhumane.org/fact-sheet/animal-shelter-euthanasia-2/#:~:text=56%20percent%20of%20dogs%20and,are%20reunited%20with%20their%20owners.>

<sup>3</sup> [AVMA Rules and Policy Change for Declawing – Vet Practice News](#)

AVAM strongly discourages cat declawing. So does the Maryland Medical Veterinary Association. However, if a veterinarian can offer the solution of a Laser Surgery to remove that cat's toe nails, I believe that both the cat and the human will have a happier, healthier life.

I have been using a Surgical Laser for the rare patient surgeries I perform. This technology is precise, safe, and top-of-the-line. It can remove a tumor on a tiny parakeet, remove toenails on a cat or perform a spay on a hundred- pound dog using a surgical laser with the same excellent results. The Laser generates a miraculous recovery for every surgery as compared to the slow painful recovery from scalpel surgery. As the beam from the laser cuts tissue, it also seals all of the blood vessels, which stops the bleeding and it also seals all of the nerve endings, which stops the pain. Before I had the surgical laser, I needed to send home lots of pain medications after surgery, now I send home lots of medications to reduce pet's activity so the pet can heal safely!

I believe that allowing a veterinarian to remove a cat's toe nails using a Surgical Laser in "Special Needs Situations" can have a very positive outcome for both the cat and the human who share a special bond. Therefore, I respectfully request a NO vote on SB 67.

## Senate Bill 67 (Declawing Cats)—Oppose

January 21, 2022

To: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

From: Rebecca Owens, DVM, Chief of Staff Banfield Greenbelt Maryland; Maryland Licensed Veterinarian #4509; Co-Chair Maryland Veterinary Medical Association Continuing Education Committee

Contact Information: Home address—2318 Westport Lane, Crofton, MD 21114

Email—[rebeccaowens820@gmail.com](mailto:rebeccaowens820@gmail.com)

Phone—mobile (904)599-5939 and work (301) 441-1139

Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee,

Thank you for accepting my written testimony regarding my opinion and expertise on declawing of cats. I have been a small animal veterinarian since 1995 and have practiced in both Maryland and Florida. I am currently practicing in Greenbelt Maryland and see on average 80 pets per week for routine care.

At the start of my career declawing cats was routine and I became very skilled at this surgery, performing perhaps 3-4 every week for several years. Clients requested it because they did not want to be physically harmed by their cats as well as wanting to protect their physical property (furniture) from destruction. I used general anesthesia, and multi modal pain control for this surgery. I experienced very few complications because I took extra care with this type of surgery in my attention to detail. In the past I have even declawed my own cats and have not witnessed any ill effects from it. Both post operative and long-term behavior was all normal. More recently, declawing has fallen out of popularity among pet owners due to concerns surrounding the necessity of the surgery. A better understanding of natural feline behaviors are now discussed and recommended with clients. The popularity of the surgery has dramatically decreased over the years. I have not performed a declaw surgery in over 5 years.

In my day to day practice few clients ask about the procedure. When I am asked about it I counsel the clients on alternatives to the surgery such as training their cats to use a scratching post, keeping the nails trimmed at home, or applying soft tips to the claws. On rare occasions a client will ask about the surgery due to a personal health concern with being scratched. For example, if a client is taking blood thinners or is immunocompromised then the conversation may lead to the potential for the surgery. In my experience if a cat is scratching their owner, then it is a behavior issue and the cat is

biting that owner as well. These cases tend to do better with behavior modification therapy—a combination of medications with training and environmental changes that will decrease the unwanted behaviors.

On rare occasions I have recommended the surgery with polydactyl cats (cats with extra and deformed toes). Even then I will only declaw the extra toes that tend to overgrow into the paw pad thus causing the cat pain. In these situations, the cat actually benefits from the surgery by avoiding overgrown nails and pain.

I seriously question the need to pass laws regulating the practice of my profession as it relates to animal welfare issues and as such, oppose Senate Bill 67. Veterinarians are already leaders in their communities as animal welfare experts. The day I graduated from veterinary school I took an oath to "...promote animal health and welfare, relieve animal suffering, protect the health of the public and environment...". I live this oath every day.

Please feel free to contact me for any further details or clarification surrounding my opinion on Senate Bill 67.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Owens, DVM

Jeanne Sanders, LFACHE  
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January 25, 2022

To Whom It May Concern:

Re: SB 67 – OPPOSE

Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee,

This letter is to respectfully request that the proposal to ban cat declawing in Maryland be declined. My request is based on the following:

My late husband developed Mild Cognitive Impairment that rapidly progressed to Alzheimer's Disease. Our beloved cat, Jonas, was his constant companion serving as his service and support animal. Jonas could comfort and calm him when nothing else would. Jonas was devoted to him and would follow him from room to room and sit with him for hours.

Jonas was not declawed and as my husband's disease progressed, he could not mentally process or prevent Jonas' claws from pricking him as Jonas sat in his lap. It was agonizing to see my husband's dismay and confusion when this happened. I recognized that the only viable solution was to have Jonas declawed.

I discussed this with Jonas' vet, Dr. Amspaugh of Quince Orchard Veterinary Hospital. He knew my husband as he had always attended our pets' appointments until his disease progressed to the point of not being able to do so. He agreed and Dr. Giebel, head of the practice, compassionately and promptly declawed Jonas using laser which minimized any discomfort to Jonas.

I cannot fully express the joy I experienced when Jonas could sit for hours with my husband again without causing him confusion because of the claws hurting him! Jonas remained his service and support animal until my husband's death a full year after Jonas was declawed.

This is not my family's only experience.

Currently my sister is battling Stage IV metastatic cancer. Her kitten, Lancelot, is her service and support animal. My sister's treatment has resulted in her being wheelchair bound and

suffering from lymphedema. She cannot risk having Lancelot's claws scratch her and result in an infection. This could be deadly for her! Lancelot is a comfort and support to her just as Jonas was to my late husband. Having him declawed is the only option for him to remain with her.

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I know that Dr. Giebel will do so with the same compassion he demonstrated with Jonas.

I recognize that these anecdotes are my family's experiences. I am confident, however, that other families across Maryland experience similar issues.

**Please do not remove the discretionary ability for Maryland veterinarians to exercise their clinical judgement in performing cat declawing! To do so will result in a profound loss of service and support for Marylanders with compromising circumstances.**

Thank you for your review of this information.

Sincerely,

*Jeanne Sanders*

Jeanne Sanders, LFACHE