



Maryland Veterinary Medical Association

Wednesday January 19, 2022

HB 22 - Animal Welfare - Declawing Cats - Prohibited Acts

OPPOSE

Chairman Barve and Members of the Environment and Transportation 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.

House Bill 22 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 ~~state~~ of declaw in Maryland, MDVMA actively inquired with cat shelters and internet adoption platforms across the state to determine the universe adoptable cats that have been declawed. MDVMA found that there were 15 adoptable cats that have been declawed, or roughly 0.31% of the observed universe of adoptable cats.

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:

“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.

Similar statutes to HB 22 noted in its fiscal note include: (1) cropping or cutting off the ear of a dog; (2) docking or cutting off the tail of a dog; (3) cutting off the dewclaw of a dog; (4) surgically birthing a dog; and (5) surgically devocalizing a dog or cat. MDVMA asserts, that under these codified statutes, that a veterinary practitioner’s professional judgment is maintained, and not limited, when deciding how to best protect their individual patients’ health and welfare. The limited exception to perform the procedure outlined in HB 22 is defined without regard to a veterinarian’s professional judgement. 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

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