



HB 22 - SUPPORT

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Animal Welfare - Declawing Cats - Prohibited Acts

Environment and Transportation Committee

January 19th, 2022

Dear Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein, and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

My name is Laura Cassiday and I own and operate Pawsitive Vibes Cat Behavior and Training LLC in Baltimore, Maryland. I am strongly in favor of HB 22. I am a certified cat behavior consultant through the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants. Simply put, my title means that I am considered an expert in the management, modification and prevention of problem behaviors in cats. It also requires me to keep up to date with the latest research and techniques in feline behavior and training. I am also a certified cat trainer through Animal Behavior College and a Fear Free Certified animal trainer. Over the years, I have worked with cats both in shelter and rescue settings, as well as with private owners. Today, I primarily focus on helping cats and their guardians in private homes, dealing with complex behavior issues from aggression to litter box issues and everything else in between.

As an expert in feline behavior and an active member of the animal welfare community in Maryland, my mission is to improve the lives of cats and their people with the ultimate goal of keeping cats in their homes and out of shelters. There is an overall lack of support and accessible education for cat owners when it comes to behavioral issues both in my area and across the United States, with widespread misinformation on cat behavior being delivered by the internet, word-of-mouth, and occasionally in my experience, even by some veterinarians. Dr. Janet Scarlett of Cornell University said in an article published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, "Less than a third [of veterinarians] felt confident of their ability to treat common behavioral problems." This may be a contributing factor in why some vets still recommend declawing to their patients – they simply aren't as well-versed in feline behavior as they could be.

During my four years working in an animal shelter in Maryland, I saw firsthand cats being surrendered on a daily basis for aggression, litter box issues, and destructive scratching. Unfortunately, many cat owners still operate under the belief that cats are independent, spiteful, and can't be trained. This is simply not true. Most people want their cats declawed in order to prevent these behavior issues from occurring in the first place. They don't want their furniture scratched up. They don't want the cat to scratch their immunocompromised child or elderly grandparent. I'm here to tell you that you absolutely can train your cat not to scratch your furniture using entirely positive, humane methods. And even in my career of working with severely aggressive cats on almost a daily basis and living in a home with eight cats, all of whom have all of their claws, I have only been scratched a handful of times in the last five years. It all comes down to educating the human how to properly interact with the cat and how to read feline body language to know the many warning signs that come before a swat. I have, however,

been bitten twice in the same timeframe, and both times I had to go to the hospital and be placed on antibiotics. In the 1988 article “Effects of declawing on feline behavior,” researchers found that declawed cats were 18.5% more likely than non-declawed cat to bite – which certainly poses more of a risk to your more vulnerable family members. Even if you aren’t interested in training your cat or learning more about his behavior, at a bare minimum these concerns can be managed by regular nail trims or Soft Paws nail caps.

In addition, many people still believe that declawing cats prevents behavior issues from developing and keeps them in their homes and out of shelters. This has not been my experience as a professional feline behavior consultant, and the research backs me up. According to research published in the Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery in 2017, declawing increases the risk of long-term or persistent pain in cats. Pain is known to increase the likelihood of unwanted behaviors such as urinating outside of the litter box and aggression, including biting. The research showed that inappropriate toileting, biting, aggression, and overgrooming occurred at least three times more often in the declawed cats than the non-declawed cats. A survey by Forgotten Felines and Friends of Caddo Parish in Louisiana found that 70% of cats surrendered to animal shelters for behavioral problems were declawed.

The reality is that by declawing cats, we are actually creating behavior problems and increasing the number of cats surrendered to shelters. In fact, the first question I ask when meeting a cat with a history of biting or chronic litter box issues is, “Is the cat declawed?” If so, I know that no amount of behavior modification or training will be able to fully resolve the issue until proper pain management has been implemented. And aside from the obvious concerns that declawing poses to the individual cat’s welfare, at the bottom line, keeping declawing legal places an unnecessary, preventable burden on our state’s municipal animal control facilities and costs tax payers money. With the limited resources that these high-volume shelters have to work with behavior problems in cats, cats with histories of aggression or litter box issues have a longer length of stay before becoming available for adoption, if they don’t end up being euthanized. A longer length of stay contributes to overcrowding, which causes cats to become stressed or sick, which in turn increases the length of stay even longer. This means that the government spends more on cat food, medication, litter, cleaning products, and more.

Any way you look at it, declawing harms not only cats, but also people. It contributes to more biting and more people in our state’s Urgent Care facilities and emergency rooms. It contributes to more homes destroyed from house soiling – but at least there are no claw marks in the couch the cat peed on, right? It contributes to more cats in our government-run animal control facilities, wasting taxpayer money. Declawing benefits no one except the veterinarian with a little more money in his bank account. As an expert in feline behavior, an active member of the cat rescue community in Maryland, a taxpayer, and a person with morals, I urge a favorable report on HB 22.

Sincerely,

Laura Cassiday, CCBC, ABBCT, FFCP