



THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

March 2, 2022

Judicial Proceedings Committee

SB816

Real Property - Actions for Possession - Pet Protections

FAVORABLE

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), on behalf of our Maryland supporters, strongly supports Senate Bill 816, which will establish basic guardrails to protect and inform pet owners and pets when evictions happen. Most particularly, in this time of uncertainty for people and their pets who are facing significant hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout 2020, in the face of an unprecedented public health emergency, our nation took immediate action to keep families stably housed by swiftly enacting eviction moratoriums and funding emergency rental assistance—critical tools that helped keep families and their pets at home. These temporary actions offered vital protections to tens of millions of renters at risk of eviction, and we’ve seen how critical layering protections at the state and local level were as the federal safety nets expired and a growing number of households fell behind on paying rent and utilities.

Animal and human welfare cannot be viewed independently and if we want to protect pets, we must also protect the people who are caring for them. A 2015 study by the ASPCA found that, among renters and especially for renters of lower income, housing insecurity was cited as the number one reason for pet relinquishment. The study found that while poverty itself is not a driver in pet retention, the ability to access affordable options for pet care and services was an important factor in otherwise capable and caring families in keeping their pet.

As tenant protections fade, eviction filings that were previously curtailed are moving forward and mounting rent debt may mean we’re on the brink of a mass eviction crisis. According to the National Equity Atlas, 102,000 Maryland households are behind on rent with an estimated \$322,800,000 owed in rent debt. Now more than ever, with so many of us experiencing unparalleled isolation and are housing insecure, the importance of companionship cannot be overstressed; and certainly, for someone who is already facing the trauma of losing their home, the added trauma of being separated from their pet is unimaginable.

The provisions of Senate Bill 816 will help ensure that those facing displacement are provided with the resources and information necessary to reunify with their beloved pets in case they are separated. If a pet is removed from the premises, active contact information for the owner is to be communicated with the animal shelter. The bill additionally requires that a unit is thoroughly searched for any pets, regardless of whether the tenant was permitted to keep animals on the property, to guarantee that no animal is forgotten.

Every one of these provisions comes from horror stories we have heard from both shelter and rescue partners, as well as housing advocates, regarding situations they directly witnessed. While these practices seem common sense, and many jurisdictions and landlords do many of these practices voluntarily, we want to ensure that these practices are codified and universal.

Too often when families are torn apart because information is not shared, and resources meant to serve our most vulnerable are left untapped. These practices are not onerous; they can be implemented through existing processes, and they create a necessary level of protection for our pets and their owners. We thank the committee for consideration of this important legislation and urge your support of SB 816.