



**March 7, 2020
Appropriations**

HB 1133

***Agriculture – Veterinary Practitioners – Student Loan Forgiveness Program
FAVORABLE***

The organizations listed above, on behalf of our members and supporters across Maryland, support HB1133 and urge a favorable vote. HB1133 would help mitigate the crippling burden of student debt for veterinarians who agree to practice in Maryland for at least two years. Maryland shelters and pet owners are struggling to access veterinary care, and ultimately it is the animals who suffer. Anything this State can do to attract and retain veterinary providers will benefit people, shelters, and pets.

Veterinarians are facing historic challenges on several fronts as the profession struggles to provide access to care to animals in Utah and nationwide. Staffing shortages are ubiquitous, with a dearth of veterinarians and veterinary technicians available to fill open positions. A recent study by Mars Veterinary Health found that there is a 16 percent shortage of veterinarians needed to meet national animal care needs and, if the current trends continue, as many as 75 million pets nationwide will be without veterinary care by 2030. In Utah, that has resulted in pet owners waiting weeks to get veterinary appointments for their pets and the situation is even more dire in rural areas where clinics finding it even harder to attract veterinary professionals for open positions.

Related to the problems created by staffing shortages are the mounting mental health challenges facing veterinary professionals. Daily juggling of packed clinic schedules, empathy for families with limited funds for necessary care, emergency situations, and euthanasia appointments can lead to burnout and compassion fatigue. Even before the pandemic, it was well documented that veterinarians' mental health was suffering and national statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that one out of every six veterinarians has considered suicide and male vets are 1.6 times more likely and female vets are 2.4 times more likely to die by suicide than the general population.

Finally, and most pertinent for this legislation, is the fact that most veterinary professionals face huge financial burdens including sizeable student loans upon graduation from veterinary school. The average veterinary student debt is currently about \$200,000 at graduation and this doesn't take into account other debt they have accumulated from undergraduate degrees and living expenses. In some cases, veterinary professionals can expect to be paying off their student loans for their entire career and in many cases this impacts their decision whether to practice in rural areas or for shelters or nonprofits, where income levels for staff may be lower.

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All of these factors have led to growing crisis for the veterinary profession and an increasing gap in accessibility for veterinary care, particularly for families in need. A national report from the Access to Veterinary Care Coalition found that one out of every four pets experiences barriers to obtaining veterinary care, with obstacles to care including financial limitations, transportation hurdles, cultural obstacles and accessibility to appointments.

The Veterinary Student Loan Forgiveness Program program proposed in HB 1133 would help attract and retain veterinary professionals to Maryland. We strongly support this legislation to help address the veterinary crisis, support veterinary professionals and provide better access to veterinary care to Maryland families in need. We urge a favorable report on HB 1133.