

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1133
March 7, 2023, Appropriations Committee

Delegate Lehman and Members of the Committee,

I am a first-year veterinary student at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University. I was born and raised in Maryland and have worked at Bennett Creek Animal Hospital + Urgent Care, located in Clarksburg, Maryland, in both small animal primary care and emergency practice. Outside of Maryland, I have interned and worked in a variety of animal health settings, including the nearby Smithsonian's National Zoo.

I support this important bill because it is a necessary step in addressing the state and national veterinary shortage crisis. This crisis not only jeopardizes the health of the pets in Maryland, but it also jeopardizes the people of Maryland.

There are substantial socioeconomic barriers to the veterinary medical profession that serve as a powerful deterrent to even considering such a career. To apply, students must undertake a rigorous pre-medicine-like curriculum during their undergraduate education and spend hundreds of dollars in application and testing fees. Even achieving veterinary school readiness is particularly difficult because, although there is some overlap, there is no standard undergraduate curriculum required by all schools. In addition to the usual pre-medicine requirements in biology and chemistry, for example, many veterinary schools require applicants to complete additional animal-related courses that are not offered at all universities, such as "medical terminology" and "animal nutrition." These additional courses often add thousands of additional tuition dollars to the cost of veterinary school readiness even before students take on hundreds of thousands of dollars of loans for veterinary school itself.

The financial burdens to position oneself to apply to veterinary school are further intensified because of students' need to acquire significant animal and veterinary experience, with a competitive applicant working with multiple types of animals. To be competitive, a veterinary school hopeful must have thousands of hours of these experiences, which often pay little more than minimum wage — if they pay at all. Thus, the enormous burden of debt from a veterinary education, coupled with the financial requirements prior to matriculation, undoubtedly deter a large swath of the population from even applying. And once accepted, costs continue to mount. For instance, I personally spent \$1,200 for a school-required rabies vaccination series in addition to the cost of tuition, fees and living expenses. This was despite repeated attempts to find an insurance-covered vaccine series through the State of Maryland's and my county's health department. However, no such prophylactic option was offered, despite the elevated health risk and clear need for rabies protection for veterinary professionals.

This bill's importance in supporting future veterinary professionals cannot be overstated. This bill is very important in helping establish the State of Maryland as one of equal opportunity for individuals of all backgrounds. The significant financial burdens present to enter the veterinary profession no doubt serve as a substantial barrier for students from underprivileged, and often

minority, backgrounds. This is not only troubling but is negatively impacting the scale and scope of care that can be provided to animals living in Maryland. Given the significant diversity found within the State of Maryland, I urge the committee to support this bill in an effort to support the state's diverse constituencies.

In addition, the role veterinarians play in society extends far beyond keeping beloved pets healthy. For example, poultry farming is an important aspect of Maryland's agricultural landscape. As evidenced by the ongoing avian influenza outbreak, large animal veterinarians are extremely important in both maintaining the health of Maryland's economy and the health of Maryland's citizens via the health of Maryland's farmed poultry population. Furthermore, in the face of ongoing human health challenges, including COVID-19, cancer, and neurodegenerative diseases, just to name a few, lab animal veterinarians are critical to maintaining the health of laboratory animal species and facilitating the continuation of ongoing research in the many biomedical research institutions found in Maryland.

In closing, I want to emphasize for the committee that the veterinary shortage crisis is an issue for humans and animals alike. Maintaining the health of Marylanders is dependent upon maintaining the health of the non-human animals that share this state with us. I hope that the committee will appreciate that supporting future veterinarians in the State of Maryland supports the health of all those, human and non-human, who reside in Maryland. For these reasons, I ask for a FAVORABLE REPORT on HB-1133.

Sincerely,

Leah Fine