

Testimony in Support of HB 912 — Ash’s Law
House Environment & Transportation Committee
Nicole Velez | Capitol Heights, Prince George’s County
Position: Favorable with Amendments

Good afternoon. My name is Nicole Velez and I’m a resident of Capitol Heights in Prince George’s County, MD. I want to begin by acknowledging the efforts PG County has made to address the free-roaming cat population via their Community Cat Program and TNVR guidelines. While I am here in support of HB 912, I ask that the members of the committee consider that caregiver protections must be part of this bill, because even where TNVR policies already exist, as they do in PG County, caregivers remain vulnerable without clear enforcement standards and caregiver protections to back them up. The written testimony I’ve submitted, outlines eight specific recommendations for this committee’s consideration.

I’ve been a community cat caregiver in my neighborhood since November 2022, when I moved into an area with a free-roaming cat population. When a neighbor first raised concerns, I contacted Animal Services, requesting they remove the cats and was informed the County had implemented TNVR and was referred to a local TNVR group.

Since then, I have cared for my vaccinated, ear tipped colony and remained in full compliance with the County’s published colony care guidance: feeding during specific time windows, not leaving food out overnight, and maintaining a clean, sanitary care area. Where possible, I have made additional good-faith adjustments in response to ongoing complaints from one neighbor, going beyond what is required.

Despite this, for over three years I have been subjected to repeated, complaint-driven enforcement activity initiated by that same neighbor. Each time, save the most recent, PG County Permitting, Inspections and Enforcement agency and Animal Control Services staff found my actions to be compliant. Nevertheless, earlier this year a DPIE inspector threatened my landlord with a citation. When I contacted him and asked how I had violated the County’s Animal Control Ordinance which specifically addresses ear-tipped free-roaming cats, the inspector, by his own admission, had never heard of the County’s TNVR guidelines and asked me to email them to him. When I followed up asking what he and his supervisor had concluded, his response was simply that “the County would be well within the right to cite the owner if the feeding of the cats continues to be a nuisance for the community.” No supporting code section was provided. No objective standard. No documented evidence of a violation.

The complaint that prompted this threat was characterized as a “health issue” with no findings and no evaluation by Animal Services or any public health authority. A generalized complaint narrative was treated as sufficient grounds for an enforcement threat. When I sought clarification from my County, I was ignored. So, I filed a MPIA request with DPIE to obtain the records behind these enforcement threats. The official response received stated that no responsive documents were found and no open code enforcement violations existed for my property. Three years of inspections and a formal written threat of citation with no official record to show for it. I had no paper trail to challenge, and no formal process to request one. That is a gap this bill must also address.

My situation is not unique to PG County. It is a preview of what compliant caregivers across Maryland will continue to face without clear statewide protections. HB 912 establishes an important and necessary foundation and I fully support it. But a law is only as strong as the

people and processes implementing it. Without amendments addressing staff training, objective enforcement standards, documentation requirements, health complaint routing, good-faith caregiver protections, and inter-agency coordination, compliant caregivers will remain vulnerable to exactly what I have experienced, regardless of what their local ordinance says.

I urge this committee to pass Ash's Law and to strengthen it so that it delivers real, durable protection for community cats and the caregivers who show up every day to care for them.

Thank you.