

**TNVR Community Cat Caregiver Protections:
Policy Gaps in HB0912 (Ash's Law) and Recommended Amendments**
Prepared by Nicole Velez | Capitol Heights, Prince George's County, Maryland
February 2026

Introduction

HB 912 (Ash's Law) represents an important and historic step toward protecting Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) practices and community cat caregivers in Maryland. This document is submitted in support of the bill with proposed amendments, based on first-hand experience as a TNVR caregiver in Prince George's County who has faced years of complaint-driven enforcement despite full compliance with the County's own Community Cat TNVR guidelines.

While Ash's Law establishes critical, the bill does not fully address the on-the-ground enforcement gaps that allow complaint-driven harassment of compliant caregivers to continue unchecked. The following policy gaps and recommended amendments are offered to strengthen the bill.

Gap 1: No Staff Training Requirement

Ash's Law does not require code enforcement officers or animal control staff to receive training on TNR policy. In my own case, a DPIE inspector threatened to cite my property owner while admitting he had never heard of Prince George's County's TNVR guidelines and asked me to email him the ordinance. A law is only as strong as the people implementing it.

- **Recommended Amendment:** Require counties and municipalities that establish TNR policies to provide documented training for all code enforcement and animal control staff on TNR guidelines, caregiver definitions, and enforcement standards.

Gap 2: No Objective Standard for Complaint-Driven Enforcement

The bill does not establish any threshold or evidentiary standard that must be met before enforcement action is taken against a caregiver. Currently, a single repeat complainant can trigger repeated inspections with no objective standard, no documented violation, and no defined burden of proof.

- **Recommended Amendment:** Require that any enforcement action related to community cat caretaking be supported by documented, objective evidence of a specific code violation, not complaint volume alone. Require the citing authority to identify the specific code section alleged to be violated and provide corrective actions limited to what is feasible and within human control.

Gap 3: No Documentation or Transparency Requirements

In response to a Maryland Public Information Act (MPIA) request I filed with DPIE, the County's official response stated that no responsive documents were found and no open code enforcement violations existed for my property, despite years of inspections and a formal written threat of citation. Enforcement was happening with no official paper trail, making it impossible to formally challenge.

- **Recommended Amendment:** Require agencies to create and maintain written records of all TNVR-related complaints, inspections, findings, and enforcement actions, and make those records accessible to the caregiver and/ or property owner upon request.

Gap 4: No Caregiver Appeal or Recourse Process

The bill does not establish any formal process for caregivers to challenge enforcement threats or actions. In my experience, the only recourse available was to escalate directly to an elected Councilmember, an extraordinary measure that no ordinary caregiver should be required to take just to protect their right to engage in lawful, compliant caretaking.

- **Recommended Amendment:** Establish a formal, accessible process by which caregivers can request review of enforcement actions, challenge citations, and receive written responses from the relevant agency within a defined timeframe.

Gap 5: No Protection Against Complaint-Based Harassment

The bill does not address what happens when complaint activity constitutes a pattern of targeted harassment. In my situation, the same neighbor has filed repeated complaints over three years despite the County repeatedly finding me in compliance. The pattern has escalated to include objects being thrown toward the cats and verbal harassment of contractors at my home. Repeated complaints from a single party with no documented violation should not indefinitely expose a compliant caregiver to enforcement risk.

- **Recommended Amendment:** Establish a provision that where a caregiver has been repeatedly found in compliance following complaints from the same party, agencies may decline to initiate new enforcement action absent new documented evidence of a violation.

Gap 6: No Inter-Agency Coordination Requirement

My situation involved a fundamental breakdown between DPIE (code enforcement) and Animal Services, the two agencies with overlapping jurisdiction over community cats. DPIE staff were unaware of Animal Services' TNVR guidelines, and there was no mechanism to route complaints to the appropriate agency. Ash's Law does not require these agencies to coordinate or clarify jurisdiction.

- **Recommended Amendment:** Require counties with TNR programs to designate a lead agency responsible for TNVR-related complaints and establish clear inter-agency referral procedures to ensure complaints are evaluated by staff with appropriate expertise.

Gap 7: No Objective Standard for "Health Issue" Complaints

In my case, a DPIE inspector moved toward enforcement posture based on a neighbor's generalized claim of a "health issue" involving the cats — without any documented findings, test results, or evaluation by Animal Services or a public health authority. A vague, unsubstantiated health claim was treated as sufficient grounds for an enforcement threat. This is a significant gap: there is no requirement that health-related allegations meet any objective standard or be evaluated by the agency with actual expertise in that area before triggering enforcement.

- **Recommended Amendment:** Establish that a generalized claim of "health issue" may not be treated as evidence of a violation. When a complaint alleges a health issue involving community cats, the matter must be routed to Animal Services or the appropriate public health authority for objective evaluation before any enforcement action is taken by a code enforcement agency. Enforcement posture must be based on documented findings by the appropriate authority, not a complainant's narrative.

Gap 8: No Protection for Good-Faith Mitigation Efforts

Ash's Law does not address one of the most serious traps facing compliant caregivers: the risk that voluntarily going beyond what is required, adjusting feeding times, relocating feeding stations, and/or adding deterrents, can later be used against them. Without explicit protections, a caregiver's good-faith efforts to cooperate with agencies or neighbors can be recharacterized as evidence that they had control over the cats, accepted ownership or responsibility, or failed to take reasonable steps in response to complaints. This chills voluntary cooperation and punishes caregivers for doing more than the law requires.

- **Recommended Amendment:** Define good-faith mitigation measures as those that are safe, feasible, lawful, and within the person's reasonable control and clarify that they do not require ongoing expense, specialized equipment, or outcomes no person can guarantee, such as ensuring preexisting free-roaming cats will cease to be present in an area. Clarify that voluntary mitigation by a caregiver does not create ownership,

custody, or legal responsibility for the independent movements or behavior of free-roaming cats. Add a “no penalty for cooperation” provision: if an agency directs a caregiver to remove or modify a mitigation measure, compliance with that directive cannot later be used as evidence that the caregiver failed to take reasonable steps in response to complaints, or exercise control over the movements and behavior of free-roaming cats.

Conclusion

Ash’s Law is a meaningful and necessary foundation. But the protections it establishes will only be as effective as the enforcement environment in which they operate. The amendments proposed above are drawn directly from the lived experience of a compliant TNVR caregiver in Prince George’s County, the same county where Ash lived and died. Strengthening this bill to address enforcement quality, documentation, and caregiver recourse will ensure that Ash’s Law delivers real, durable protection for community cats and the people who care for them.

Submitted respectfully,

Nicole Velez

Capitol Heights, Prince George’s County, Maryland

nvelez175@gmail.com