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Formerly called the Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International

February 4, 2026

House Government Operations and Military Affairs
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Dear Chair Birong and Members of the Government Operations and Military Affairs Committee:

On behalf of our thousands of supporters in Vermont and as the Northeast Regional Director for Humane World for Animals (formerly the Humane Society of the United States), I am writing to provide comments on H 841. We appreciate the intent of the legislation and support several provisions. However, we have concerns and respectfully recommend a different approach to other sections related to outdoor cats and transport programs.

Authorities given to the Division of Animal Welfare

We strongly support giving the Division of Animal Welfare the same authority to inspect pet dealers, animal shelters, rescue organizations, and kennels as municipal animal control officers. Having statewide oversight creates consistency across entities. Equally important is creating updated rules and regulations around the operation of animal shelters and animal rescues in Vermont, which are currently under no oversight. We encourage the committee to consider giving the Director of Animal Welfare specific rule-making authority around the operation of these organizations. Vermont's animal welfare regulations, which currently only apply to pet dealers and pet shops, are woefully outdated. We stand ready to assist the Division with modernizing these protocols to ensure both animal welfare and public safety are addressed.

We do have concerns with the requirement that shelters and rescues from outside of Vermont be licensed in order to transfer cats and dogs into the state. As written, this requirement would add additional costs to under-resourced organizations that utilize responsible transport programs as a lifesaving tool. We also have concerns that this requirement is limited to municipal and non-profit shelters and rescues and not to brokers of puppy mills, breeders, or other means by which cats and dogs enter the state, including internet sales. If the intent is that the state of Vermont would require out of state organizations to license with the Division of Animal Welfare, we urge the Division to extend this requirement to all entities and not penalize those that are responsibly moving animals into the state as a means to save lives.

Should licensing be required, we would recommend that neighboring New England shelters and New York shelters be exempt as the flow of animals throughout the region is critical to the infrastructure that allows shelters to support one another when capacity becomes a challenge such as during a disaster or large-scale cruelty case.

Outdoor cat spay/neuter, rabies vaccinations and licensing

We also have concerns with the provision directing the Division of Animal Welfare to adopt rules requiring outdoor cats to be vaccinated for rabies, spayed or neutered, and licensed. Mandatory spay/neuter



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policies have consistently proven ineffective because they do not address the underlying barriers that prevent many cats from receiving veterinary care in the first place.

Director Milot's comprehensive plan, presented to the committee last month, demonstrated that expanding access to veterinary services—including spay/neuter procedures and rabies vaccinations—is needed to improve animal welfare in the state. Vermonters are already struggling to secure basic care for their companion animals, and these challenges are even more pronounced for free-roaming outdoor cats. This population receives little to no targeted government support and imposing new regulatory requirements on the individuals who voluntarily care for these animals will not resolve the systemic access issues at hand.

The Division of Animal Welfare is taking meaningful steps to improve access to veterinary care. However, mandating sterilization, vaccination, and licensing for outdoor cats does not advance that goal and is unlikely to produce the intended public health or animal welfare benefits. We encourage the Division to instead identify tactics to expand access to needed veterinary care for outdoor cats, such as targeted trap-neuter-return initiatives.

Funding for the Division of Animal Welfare

We support the creation of a check-off program to help fund the Division and the ability for the Division to accept donations.

Rabies Vaccinator Program: Support Intent, but Recommend Addressing Full Scope of Crisis

H 841 will establish a program to train humane officers, as defined by 13 V.S.A. § 351, to be certified rabies vaccinators. These individuals cannot accept compensation for their rabies-related services and are immune from liability.

We support the intent of expanding access to rabies vaccinations in Vermont. This provision is one small step in the right direction. However, the rabies portion of H 841 does not fully address the lack of access to rabies vaccines and the significant overall lack of access to veterinary care in this state. Reflecting a broader national trend, Vermont is experiencing a crisis in access to care, driven in large part by a shortage of veterinary professionals and the under-utilization of credentialed veterinary technicians. This in turn limits the availability and affordability of essential preventative services, such as rabies and other life-saving vaccinations. This state-wide crisis is particularly acute in rural and underserved areas. We welcome the opportunity to work with the committee to explore more complete and comprehensive solutions to these challenges.

Respectfully,

Joanne Bourbeau

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