

March 13, 2025

RE: Testimony in Support of LD 528 – An Act to Address the Rise in Rabies in Animals by Appointing Certified Rabies Vaccine Administrators

Senator Talbot-Ross, Representative Pluecker, and other Honorable Members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee:

My name is Katie Lisnik and I am the elected Chair of the Animal Welfare Advisory Council, which was established in 2001 per MRS Title 7, Chapter 717. ANIMAL WELFARE ACT, §3906-C. The purpose of this Governor-appointed Council is to “advise” the ACF Commissioner on matters pertaining to animal welfare. We have been actively meeting almost monthly since 2022 and are working on a variety of issues to advance animal protections in the legislative arena, as well as at the procedural level with guidance being offered on important functions such as the Help Fix ME program and Animal Control Officer certification requirements and training. We also work to improve big picture issues facing animals in the state, one of which is the lack of easy access to important veterinary care across the state.

We thank Representative Doudera for bringing this bill forward for your consideration. While Maine is not unique in the current difficulty in accessing veterinary care, our rural composition does add another challenge. We have heard from multiple sources that getting animals vaccinated against rabies is difficult and is, in some areas of our state, practically impossible for many animal owners, especially in northern, western and eastern Maine. This bill seeks to address this challenge and provide for the life-saving rabies vaccine that is so important for public health as well.

Rabies is a viral disease that is transmissible by animal bites. All mammals are potentially susceptible to it. There is no treatment apart from an expensive post-exposure vaccination and antibodies series. If the post exposure treatment is not pursued or somehow fails, the viral infection will be fatal. Maine has multiple cases of rabies in wildlife every year. It can only be diagnosed post-mortem, so there is no effective screening for it. Pre-exposure vaccination remains our best tool for preventing the spread of this fatal and contagious disease.

The inability for domestic animals to be vaccinated due to a lack of veterinary capacity poses a significant public health issue, along with legal issues for dog owners. To obtain a required dog license, the dog(s) need to be vaccinated against rabies. This means that these dog owners aren't paying the legally required licensing fees to the state, which fees support various aspects of work of the state and municipalities. The dog owners are

breaking the law, but are doing so because they are having difficulty becoming compliant due to an inability to access veterinary care.

This bill, with the amendment proposed by the Maine Veterinary Medical Association (MVMA), would allow a trained vaccinator to be appointed by the ACF Commissioner to administer rabies vaccines in areas where a veterinarian is unavailable. This has already successfully been done in other states. AWAC took feedback from the MVMA to ensure that veterinarian concerns were fully addressed and we are in full agreement with their amendment to the existing wording of the rabies law, to be changed from the vague wording, "rabies vaccine shall only be administered by a veterinarian or under supervision of a veterinarian" to "by a veterinarian, by a licensed veterinary technician under indirect veterinary supervision, or by a rabies vaccinator under the indirect supervision of the state veterinarian." This would allow clinics to administer more vaccines and allow veterinary technicians to perform vaccination clinics, expanding access to the vaccine state-wide, as well as improving vaccination capacity at animal shelters and rescues across the state.

We believe that this important bill will allow for greater public safety and animal health across Maine. We thank you for your consideration of this bill and urge you to vote Ought to Pass.

Sincerely,

*Katie Lionik, Chair*  
Licensed Animal Shelters

*Dr. Casey Cole, Past Chair*  
Equine Experience and Care

*Sharon St. John*  
Licensed Breeding Kennels

*Dennis Morelli*  
State-based Animal Advocacy Group

*Julie Ann Smith*  
Livestock Experience with Statewide Farming  
Organization

*Dr. Dana Hill*  
Cooperative Extension Agent or Specialist

*Dr. Jessica Matulis*  
Licensed Veterinarian/MVMA

*Kathleen Benard*  
Pet Owner/Public Representative

*Kim McLaughlin*  
Municipal Interests

*Frank Billings*  
Licensed Boarding Kennels

*Ruthann Weist*  
Animal Control Officers

*Bonnie Martinolich*  
Attorney with Animal Law Experience