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LD 595

My name is Susan Hall. I live in Falmouth and am a co-founder of the Help Fix ME program.

At first glance, this bill, LD 595, may look like unnecessary legislation so I will explain. During the last session, this Committee voted unanimously to require the Animal Welfare Program (AWP) turn the administration of the Help Fix ME (HFM) program over to a private animal welfare organization.

The current law states that the request for proposals (RFPs) are to be issued no later than August 1, 2022. It is now February 27th and no RFPs have been issued. I don't understand why state agencies don't have to abide by state law.

So, right now the Animal Welfare Program is still administering the Help Fix ME program. Since early last year individuals have not been able to apply for vouchers. The department was waiting to see if expired vouchers would come through. Why not contact the holders of the vouchers and see if they were even still needed? This could have freed up funding for others.

At least the program is open again. However, vouchers are being sent only to vets or groups that run spay/neuter clinics while the HFM phone line refers callers to Spay Maine. Spay Maine has been getting pleas since last winter from individuals all over the state who have unsuccessfully tried to get vouchers from HFM.

HFM is supposed to be a statewide program and spay/neuter clinics are very localized and few. We need local vets involved so not just the few areas with the big clinics are served. We must work with the entire veterinary community to convince them to engage in a small amount of community service by taking a few vouchers per month. Veterinary relations have been totally ignored. We can't just give up and say no vets want to take vouchers anymore without doing the hard work of at least trying to get some back on board. Keep in mind, there are currently only three veterinarians who consistently travel to do these mobile clinics. One is talking about retiring.

So why have we asked that these rules be made "major substantive?" We, the founders of this program along with constituents who most need this program, found that the proposed rules were going to completely change the program and not for the better.

How would the proposed rules change the program? I'll list just a few examples here because a comprehensive analysis would take too long for this hearing. It will need to wait for the work session.

How could the proposed rules negatively change the program?

These rules would create more bureaucracy and paperwork for both the veterinarians and the new administrator with this prepayment system for vets. It appears that this would also keep veterinary payments with the state, not with the new administrator. At least two of three large mobile spay/neuter vets oppose this prepayment idea.

These rules would hobble the flexibility of the new administrator with unnecessary rules. For example, dictating what codes the new administrator must use in reports, outlining how to pre pay the vets are all minor details that should be left to the new administrator to have the flexibility to effectively run the program.

These rules would change the determination of overpopulation of feral cats in a way that doesn't take into account the many, many pockets of feral cat colonies and hoarding situations. Until Maine gets a handle on these situations we cannot declare the state cat overpopulation problem solved. This is important because both the current and proposed rules allocate funding based on if there is any overpopulation.

These rules would unnecessarily define spay/neuter events as 20 or more animals. Many clinics hosted by smaller groups are less than 20 animals. All we need to do is make sure whichever group or veterinarian is hosting a clinic ensures eligibility for each individual. There is no need for a definition of event unless the department is trying to change the program to continue as it is currently being run, for events only.

Especially concerning are the qualifications required when choosing the new administrator. They are written such that no group in Maine that is involved with spay/neuter could qualify or want to apply. Also, any organization that applied would not be able to hold public clinics and use HFM vouchers. Please keep in mind that HFM has run the program since inception with

one half time employee.

The current rules are simple and straightforward, the proposed rules are not.

The upshot for HFM is that complicating the rules will not fix the program. It needs new competent modern management. That was the objective of the new law but the law has been ignored.

We submitted our concerns about the revamping of HFM prior to the official rules hearing and again at the rules hearing. In spite of our over 20 years of experience with the HFM program, we found all of our suggestions falling on deaf ears. We were alarmed at what the consequences of these changes could be and we saw presenting this legislation to you as our only alternative.

We propose that the current rules be kept as they are and that a simple addendum to the current rules be added to outline the rules the new administrator must follow. Senator John Nutting, a previous Senate Chair of this committee will outline suggestions. He has great institutional knowledge about this program and the work this Committee and animal welfare groups have done to develop, fund and maintain funding for this program.

I hope in the work session you will agree that the current simple straightforward rules need very little if any change and that the proposed changes add unnecessary complications, bureaucracy and paperwork.