

January 31, 2024

Rep. Robert Craven, Chair
House Committee on Judiciary
The State of Rhode Island General Assembly
via email: HouseJudiciary@rilegislature.gov

Dear Chair Craven and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and Best Friends Animal Society (Best Friends), we respectfully submit this testimony to the House Committee on Judiciary in **Support of House Bill 7075**.

This bill provides protection for both cats and the people who are diligently working to manage their populations by making it clear that trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR) activities are not "abandonment." These efforts are vital in managing the number of cats living outdoors as well as ensuring those cats are vaccinated against rabies. An identical bill passed the House by unanimous vote in 2023, demonstrating the broad support for this legislation.

We support strategic, non-lethal management of unowned outdoor cats through sterilization and vaccination efforts with the goal of humanely reducing, and eventually eliminating, populations of unowned outdoor cats and the nuisance behaviors and public health concerns associated with them. Returning healthy cats to the location they were found after sterilization and vaccination should not be considered abandonment.

Many communities across the state looking to decrease the number of unowned cats coming into municipal and private shelters utilize TNVR. TNVR provides both a positive outcome for those cats and prevents countless more cats from being born outdoors. It also reduces behaviors associated with mating that often cause residents to complain. Vaccinating free-roaming cats against rabies and other common feline diseases helps to prevent disease outbreaks and reduces the threat of rabies transmission to people and other animals. Research shows that TNVR can stabilize, reduce, and eventually eliminate free-roaming cat populations, proving to be a valuable tool for animal welfare professionals.

Due to the number of free-roaming cats, municipal shelters and animal control agencies rely on residents' participation in trapping cats. A volunteer or caretaker may capture the cats, take them to be vetted and then return the cats back to their outdoor home. Releasing these cats at the same location where they have been living prior to being captured is not abandoning those cats. A resident should not fear being charged with abandonment simply because they took an action to reduce cat overpopulation and safeguard public health.

Sometimes the person trapping and securing vetting for the cat is not the same person who is caring for the cat. Experienced cat trapping volunteers often assist compassionate citizens who feed cats but who are unable to transport or secure the veterinary care for TNVR. Therefore, the act of returning a cat should not be considered abandonment even if

the person doing so will not be providing food, water and shelter for the cat going forward.

It is estimated that upwards of 11% of U.S. households engage in feeding and otherwise providing for cats living outdoors. Commonly, free-roaming cats have more than one caretaker in the community. And while it is often clear who is caring for the cats, sometimes there is evidence cats are being fed on a regular basis without the identity of the caretaker being known. A volunteer cat trapper should be able to confidently return a healthy cat to the location where the cat has thrived without fear of accusations of animal abandonment.

The American Bar Association, in a 2017 resolution in support of TNVR policy, notes that abandonment laws should not be interpreted as to prevent the return of cats and suggests that "for clarity, the abandonment law should expressly exempt TNVR 'return' of ear-tipped community cats."

The most effective policies are those that encourage use of best practices without creating barriers for residents' participation. High levels of sterilization are needed to have a significant impact on cat overpopulation. Rhode Island needs as many people engaged with TNVR efforts as possible to be successful and should remove any existing barriers to humanely managing the state's community cat population. Residents should feel able and welcomed to participate in TNVR without the threat of being charged with abandoning a cat they assisted through TNVR.

We respectfully ask the committee to vote in favor of House Bill 7075.

Sincerely,

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