



**House
Legislative
Analysis
Section**

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ANIMAL STERILIZATION

**House Bill 5926 (Substitute H-1)
First Analysis (11-12-96)**

**Sponsor: Rep. Gerald Law
House Committee: Health Policy**

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

In Michigan, over 200,000 dogs and cats are euthanized each year in public and private animal shelters. Many lost and more abandoned animals die from sickness, hunger, or injury. Millions of dollars of private donations and public tax dollars are spent each year in picking up, housing and caring for, and/or euthanizing these animals. With the legalization of ferrets as pets, the problem of homeless animals can only increase. Several animal control shelters in the state currently require people to spay or neuter the animals adopted from their shelters. Over the years, these shelters have seen a significant decrease in the numbers of homeless and unwanted animals coming to the shelter, which in turn has resulted in a decrease in the number of animals euthanized. Therefore, some people believe that state law should encourage pet owners to have their animals spayed and neutered. Such a policy, it is argued, would reduce statewide the number of unwanted and uncared for animals coming into shelters and then needing to be euthanized. Legislation has been proposed to require both publicly- and privately-operated animal shelters to require that animals adopted from their shelters be sterilized.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would amend Public Act 287 of 1969, which regulates pet shops, dog pounds, and animal shelters. Among other provisions and new definitions, the bill would require animal control shelters and animal protection shelters to contract with those adopting a non-sterilized dog, cat, or ferret to have the animal sterilized within a specified time.

The bill would also provide for penalties for noncompliance with the contract. Under the bill, animal breeders would be exempt from the act's licensing and registration requirements and therefore would not be subject to the sterilization requirements if they sold or otherwise transferred their own animals, or first generation offspring from their animals, and did not act as animal shelters. Further, the licensing and registration exemption would extend to a person who obtained an

animal with the intent to resell the animal or find it a different home provided the person has no more than two such animals at any one time and limits these transactions to no more than six in a twelve-month period. However, the exemption would not exempt the animals from vaccination, licensing, and handling requirements under provisions in the Dog Law of 1919 and Public Act 358 of 1994 (MCL 287.261 et al. and MCL 287.891 et al.).

Shelters. Currently, the act regulates "dog pounds" (governmental entities) and "animal shelters" (nonprofit entities). The bill would replace the term "dog pound" with the term "animal control shelter". An animal control shelter would be defined as "a facility operated by a municipality for the impoundment and care of animals that are found in the streets or at large, animals that are otherwise held due to the violation of a municipal ordinance or state law, or animals that are surrendered to the animal control shelter". The term "animal shelter" would be changed to "animal protection shelter", but would retain the existing definition.

Under the bill, shelters or their designees would be required to contract with any person adopting a non-sterilized animal to have it sterilized. (The rightful owner of a dog, cat, or ferret who reclaimed his or her animal from a shelter would not have to contract to have the animal sterilized.) The sterilization would be required within four weeks of the adoption for animals six months of age or older, or four weeks from the date the animal turns six months old. A deposit of at least \$25 would be collected by the shelter and returned when the person adopting the animal presented a veterinarian's certificate verifying that the animal was sterilized within the prescribed time limit. Failure to comply would result in the loss of the deposit money, which would go to the shelter to finance sterilizations; to educate the public about the benefits of sterilizing dogs, cats and ferrets; and to ensure compliance with the sterilization law. However, an exception to the sterilization requirement would be made for an animal certified by a veterinarian to be at risk of a serious, permanent medical or health problem. In cases where an animal died before it was sterilized, but within the time period specified on the

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contract for the sterilization procedure, the deposit would be returned upon verification of the animal's death by a veterinarian. A deposit would not be required for dogs transferred to local, state, or federal law enforcement agencies or to organizations or trainers that train guide, leader, hearing, and service dogs. (In addition, animals transferred to research facilities would not be subject to the required deposit, as those transfers would not fall under the definition of "adoption". "Adoption" would mean "a transfer of ownership, with or without remuneration, of a dog, cat, or ferret from an animal control shelter or animal protection shelter to an individual for the purpose of being a companion animal for that individual." A companion animal would include but not be limited to a hunting dog or a guard dog.)

In addition, shelters would be required to keep annual records of the total number of dogs, cats, ferrets, and other animals received; returned to owners; adopted out; sold or transferred; sterilized and not sterilized; and euthanized. Each of these categories would be broken down as to whether the animal was under or above six months of age. A copy of the record would be provided to the Department of Agriculture by March 31 of the following year.

Penalties. In addition to any other remedies provided under the act, shelters violating the animal sterilization provisions of the bill would be subject to revocation of their registration. A person who did not comply with the contract to sterilize a dog, cat, or ferret would be subject to paying liquidated damages of \$150 or actual costs, whichever is greater, for breach of contract. Failure to comply with the contract requirements under the bill would, at a court's discretion, result in having the animal returned to the original shelter or to a veterinarian or other shelter, where the animal would be euthanized or adopted out to a person willing to have it sterilized. (**Note:** The bill appears to contain an incorrect reference to the section containing the sterilization contract language.)

The bill would authorize animal protection shelters to enlist the aid of the local law enforcement agency or animal control agency in enforcing terms of contracts. Under the bill, the director of the Department of Agriculture would be able to issue appearance tickets for misdemeanor violations of the bill by a pet shop or shelter or their agents. The director also would be able to obtain injunctions against those violating the act, and obtain declaratory judgments that a particular act, method, or practice was in violation of the act.

The bill would take effect on January 1, 1997.

MCL 287.331 et al.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

House Bill 5926 is a reintroduction of previous legislation (House Bill 4653) that was vetoed by the governor due to the following concerns: that the new reporting requirements by animal control shelters could have Headlee implications by containing unfunded mandates on local units of government, that language requiring pet shops to distribute literature on pet sterilization as a requirement for licensure was too vague, the awarding of attorney fees to shelters for a person's failure to meet the terms of an adoption contract, and an incorrect reference which rendered a penalty section of the bill meaningless. (**Note:** For more information, see the House Legislative Analysis Section's analysis on enrolled House Bill 4654 dated 4-12-96.)

According to information from animal shelter advocates, twenty other states have adopted laws requiring mandatory sterilization of dogs and cats adopted from public and private animal shelters (Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas, and Virginia). A few states even subsidize the surgeries. In all the states, non-compliance results in forfeiture of a deposit. Twelve of the states also make non-compliance a violation of law.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

According to the House Fiscal Agency, cost and revenue implications for local governments would be minimal as local animal control shelters are currently required to keep records of the number of animals in their custody. In addition, the shelters would be allowed to keep deposit money when an alteration contract was breached. There would be no fiscal impact on the state. (10-31-96)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

More than 70,000 puppies and kittens are born every day in the United States, yet only one in five will be cared for the duration of its lifetime. A female dog and her offspring can be the source of 67,000 puppies over six years; a cat and her offspring can bring 420,000 other cats into the world in just seven years. Uncared for animals not only are at risk for death and injury to themselves, but also pose health risks to humans through animal bites and scratches and the spread of rabies. Passage of this bill would not eliminate unwanted animals, but it would be a major first step in reducing the numbers of animals coming into shelters, and would especially reduce the high cost of euthanizing and disposing of these animals.

According to information from the Michigan Humane Society, Kent County Animal Control Shelter has seen a 61 percent decrease in both the numbers of cats and dogs received at the shelter and animals euthanized since instituting a mandatory spay/neuter program in 1972. The privately-run Humane Society of Huron Valley, which serves Washtenaw County, has seen a 67 percent decrease in animals received at the shelter and a 71 percent decrease in the number of animals euthanized since its mandatory spay/neuter program went into effect in 1975. Even in counties where mandatory spay/neuter programs are not enforced as aggressively, shelters are still seeing a significant drop in the number of animals being brought to the facilities and the number of animals being euthanized. Therefore, instituting a statewide mandatory spay/neuter program and increasing enforcement efforts should result in considerable savings in tax dollars and private donations as the cost to operate the shelters declines in response to fewer unwanted animals and fewer animals being euthanized.

For:

Mandatory sterilization of dogs, cats, and ferrets adopted from animal control and protection shelters, along with the resulting fees for non-compliance, will go a long way in increasing responsibility for pets adopted from these shelters. For instance, a person investing only \$5 or \$10 for an animal from a shelter may not seek necessary medical attention for a sick dog when they can get another dog for \$5. With the bill in place, those adopting animals from the shelters will be much more committed to seeing that the animal gets proper food, shelter, and medical attention.

Against:

The governor already vetoed a similar bill, House Bill 4654, because, among other things, the bill's provisions could constitute unfunded mandates on local governments that operate animal control shelters.

Response:

According to proponents of the bill, House Bill 5926 adequately addresses the governor's concerns. A troublesome provision requiring pet shops to distribute literature on the problems of pet over-population and the benefits of pet sterilization as a requirement of licensure was eliminated, as was the provision that the shelters be awarded attorney fees when enforcing a contract. The concern over the bill having Headlee implications due to the new reporting requirements constituting an unfunded mandate is unfounded. First of all, the decision by a municipality to have an animal control shelter is voluntary. Some municipalities opt to contract with privately operated animal protection shelters. Secondly, most of the data to be collected listed in the bill is already required to be gathered by departmental regulations.

According to the Department of Agriculture, the only new reporting requirements would be to record the number of adopted animals that were and were not sterilized and to send a copy of all data collected to the department annually. The cost of these two reporting additions would be minimal. The last concern, an incorrect reference in a penalty section that references the wrong section in regards to contract language, can be easily fixed by amendment.

Against:

Some people are concerned that veterinarians may raise fees for sterilization procedures if there is mandatory sterilization for dogs, cats, and ferrets adopted from animal control or protection shelters.

Response:

Sterilization is a one-time procedure. Veterinarians usually build their practices around preventive procedures such as rabies and distemper vaccines, heartworm testing, and treating illnesses. They want and cultivate repeat customers. A veterinarian charging outrageous fees for sterilization procedures would be hard-pressed to entice pet owners to come back for a rabies shot.

Against:

A deposit, coupled with a possible fine of over a hundred dollars, plus the cost of the sterilization procedure, would be a deterrent for adopting dogs, cats, and ferrets from animal control or protection shelters. Some people are concerned that deposit fees higher than \$25 would especially be a deterrent in rural or economically depressed areas of the state. Though the deposit is refundable, there could be a lag time of up to six to seven months between the adoption of the animal and the refund of the deposit. The time frame would depend on the age of the animal at adoption and how long a shelter would need to process a refund after receiving proof that the sterilization procedure had been completed. To have a deposit tied up for six months or longer would place an undue burden on some people adopting animals.

Response:

Twenty other states already have similar legislation, and have seen no decrease in the number of adoptions from shelters. Michigan's Bay County Animal Control Department has had a very similar program to the one proposed in House Bill 5926 in operation for several years. The department reports a 90 percent compliance rate with the sterilization requirement and has seen an increase in the level of responsibility on the part of people adopting animals. Where many feel that a \$25 deposit is sufficient, some people believe that a deposit of at least \$50 is more in line with the cost of sterilizing an animal, and thus would serve to increase voluntary compliance. They feel that too low of a deposit would make it cheaper for a person to forfeit the deposit than to have the animal

sterilized. However, the bill's provision specifying only a minimum deposit would give a county or shelter the discretion to set a deposit amount that serves the needs of the local area.

Reply:

If enforced, noncompliance with the sterilization requirement of this bill would result in more than just the forfeiting of the deposit. A person would be subject to a fine of \$150 for liquidated damages or the actual costs, plus the chance of losing custody of the animal. These fees and the possible loss of the animal are far greater than the cost of the sterilization procedure and should be a sufficient incentive for voluntary compliance.

POSITIONS:

The Michigan Humane Society supports the bill. (10-31-96)

The Michigan Veterinary Medical Association supports the bill. (10-31-96)

Analyst: S. Stutzky

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.