

Environment Committee
Public Hearing: 3/15/13

Testimony Concerning HB 5836

An Act Concerning the Availability of Funding for the Vaccination, Sterilization, and heart worm testing of dogs and cats owned by low income persons or adopted from municipal or regional shelters.

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Connecticut's Animal Population Control Program has made tremendous contributions to our state's ability to reduce the pet overpopulation. In its 19 years of existence it has helped fund millions of spay/neuter procedures thus preventing countless additional litters that cannot be placed in homes. Better still, none of the funding for this program (even administrative costs) comes from tax dollars – revenue comes from dog license fees, pound adoption fees, and sales of the Caring for Pets CT license plates.

The program provides spay/neuter assistance through the distribution of vouchers, the value of which is pre-determined by the sex and breed of the animal. Most commonly, vouchers are obtained when an animal is adopted from a pound, in exchange for a \$45 adoption fee. The adopter then presents the voucher to a participating veterinarian at the time of surgery for redemption. In almost all cases, depending on the rates of the vet or clinic, the voucher only covers a portion of the total cost of the procedure. The adopter is responsible for the balance of the cost.

There are two sub-programs of the APCP that administer vouchers. One is the low-income program, for which 10% of the APCP account may be used. Low-income persons may obtain a voucher by submitting an application to the Dept. of Agriculture. Of those who receive the vouchers, only 50 – 60% are redeemed each year, which leaves a lot of intact animals able to reproduce and further burden our shelters with unwanted animals.

The second sub-program addresses feral cats. Under this program, funding is also limited to 10% of the APCP account, and vouchers are applied for and obtained by non-profits who are using Trap-Neuter-Return methods to control feral cat populations. This program has been very heavily used, with 96 – 98% of the vouchers redeemed.

HB 5836 primarily addresses the low-income program. We would like to further incentivize spay/neuter procedures for pets in low-income families by:

- 1) Raising the 10% cap on funding from the APCP account that may be spent on low-income vouchers
- 2) Increasing the voucher redemption values (for low-income vouchers only) so that the vouchers will cover a greater portion of the total cost at the vet. We have proposed new values loosely based on the rates at CT low-cost spay/neuter clinics.

Additionally, we recognize that the low redemption rate among low-income persons is not due solely to financial factors. Logistics and the application procedure can be a hindrance. We'd like to encourage further

streamlining the distribution of benefits by:

- 3) Allowing non-profits and Animal Control Offers direct access to vouchers under the low-income program for whenever they assist qualifying low-income persons with spaying or neutering their pets. Also, a number of ACOs are very proactive in assisting communities with Trap Neuter Return efforts, and they have expressed interest in having direct access to vouchers under the feral cat program – we have included this provision as well.
- 4) Finally, we are proposing to provide vaccination benefits to all animals adopted from pounds, regardless of whether they also receive a voucher for sterilization. This is in the best interest of public health and safety for animals and people alike.

As described above, the APCP Account is well-funded through dog license fees, pound adoption fees, and sales of the Pets license plates. For the past several years, the account has been operating with an annual surplus, reaching as high as \$243k in 2010. The extra accumulation of funds has been swept twice in the past 5 years, resulting in \$1,043,000 diverted to other state budget lines. A portion of this diverted money was specifically donated by Connecticut citizens who bought the Caring for Pets plates because they believed they were contributing to the cause of reducing our pet overpopulation. An account sweep of this magnitude is unconscionable, and I want to ensure it never happens again.

The modest expansions in benefits we are proposing should be easily absorbed by the APCP account. Yet they will result in even more significant reductions in homeless pets in CT, and in return reduce the burden on our municipal and regional shelter system.

I appreciate your consideration and support of this bill.