



Assembly Bill 1237

California Public Interest Veterinary Debt Relief Act

SUMMARY

California is experiencing a crisis-level shortage of veterinarians. AB 1237 will attract existing veterinary professionals to practice where the need is the greatest by providing state funding to apply towards educational debt in exchange for their agreement to work for a California animal shelter or in communities in need for a minimum of five years. Funding will be distributed by the California Student Aid Commission in grants for debt relief for practicing veterinarians who have the desire for public service.

BACKGROUND

Private practice veterinarians are struggling to keep up with existing client services, in many cases resulting in weeks-long wait times for office visits. The demand from full-paying client services has nearly eliminated the supply of reduced rate services for community members living on fixed incomes and animal shelters.

California's animal shelters are having challenges accessing veterinary care for their animals. Most don't employ their own veterinarians, instead relying on contracts with private practices to perform surgeries and create medical treatment plans for shelter animals. Shelters that do have the resources to hire their own veterinarians are finding it nearly impossible to fill vacancies.

An October 2022 survey of California animal shelters revealed that less than half can consistently provide treatment for non-routine illness or injury that requires a vet assessment. After-hours emergency care is extremely limited and in many cases are requiring up to a two-hour drive for care. Homeless pets and owned pets are going untreated for sometimes serious injury and illness because access to veterinary care is simply out of reach. This causes both animal and human suffering.

NEED FOR THE BILL

Many veterinarians would like to specialize in shelter medicine, provide care to underserved communities and pet owners and lend their expertise to affordable care clinics, but are restrained by personal finances. Veterinarians have the second highest monthly debt-to-income ratio (12.6%) among graduate degree holders with student loan debt out of balance with their earnings after graduation. In some cases, veterinarians are working beyond retirement age to pay off their loans or retiring with remaining debt.

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) reports the average veterinary school graduate debt is \$188,853 and educational debt for veterinary graduates is growing by nearly \$6000 each year. The debt load for these graduating vets makes it difficult to impossible for them to choose to practice in the community service space.

SOLUTION

AB 1237 offers a viable pathway for veterinarians to transition to providing care and community service in California, thereby increasing the number of veterinary professionals working in the shelters and serving the community.

SUPPORT

San Diego Humane Society (Sponsor)
San Francisco SPCA (Sponsor)

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