



March 3, 2025

The Honorable Robert Craven, Chairman  
House Judiciary Committee  
House of Representatives  
82 Smith St.  
Providence, RI 02903

**Re: LETTER OF OPPOSITION- H5668, AN ACT RELATING TO ANIMALS AND ANIMAL HUSBANDRY --  
CRUELTY TO ANIMALS**

Dear Chair Craven:

I am writing to express the American Veterinary Medical Association's opposition to H5668, which would prohibit performance of a declaw procedure on a cat, unless it is performed for a therapeutic purpose, and create penalties for violation. Although the AVMA discourages onychectomy (declawing) of cats as an elective procedure and encourages veterinarians to counsel their clients about non-surgical alternatives, we have grave concerns about legislative and regulatory actions that remove the professional judgment of veterinarians in determining when to perform specific veterinary procedures.

***Good animal health and welfare is supported by the veterinarian's ability to apply professional judgment within the context of the veterinarian-client-patient relationship***

The adoption of H5668 would circumvent the professional judgment of Rhode Island veterinarians and disrupt the veterinarian-client-patient relationship, which has long been the foundation of veterinary medical practice. Best health and welfare outcomes for veterinary patients, clients, and the public require that decisions involving the diagnosis and treatment of veterinary patients—including the performance of surgical procedures, such as declawing—be made by the animal's veterinarian in consultation with the animal's owner. This ensures that each animal receives the best possible care that is uniquely tailored to its needs. Veterinarians must retain authority to exercise professional judgment in making clinical recommendations that are in the best interest of their patients.

***Viable alternatives to legislative and regulatory action***

With respect to onychectomy, and as an alternative to legislative and/or regulatory action, the AVMA strongly recommends that veterinarians thoroughly educate cat owners about the normal scratching behaviors of cats and that they support their clients in exploring and implementing alternatives to declawing.

The AVMA assists veterinarians in these efforts by providing educational resources (example attached) that can help them communicate effectively with their clients. If such alternatives fail, with a potential consequence being the relinquishment and/or euthanasia of the cat, then onychectomy becomes the option of last resort. These statements are supported by a survey of veterinary practices that revealed most veterinarians recommend nonsurgical alternatives to onychectomy and that veterinarians who perform the surgery do so infrequently, at a rate of one procedure or fewer per month.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Pain management and patient outcomes***

Veterinarians recognize that onychectomy is a major surgery. Perioperative pain management is necessary and required for this procedure. Just as for other surgical procedures, advancements in knowledge and technology mean that onychectomy procedures have evolved. Contemporary approaches to onychectomy have resulted in fewer surgical complications and better patient outcomes.

Declawing is a controversial procedure; however, we speak for the profession in voicing our opposition to H5668 and ask that every effort be made to ensure that veterinarians retain their ability to apply their professional judgment when it comes to medical and surgical decisions that impact the health and welfare of their patients. Veterinarians have an obligation to consider the unique needs of the patient that is in front of them and a duty to inform their clients of a given procedure's risks, benefits, and alternatives. Declawing is neither unique nor singular in that regard. We thank you for supporting our patients, their owners, and our profession by protecting the ability of veterinarians to act in their patients' best interests.

For questions regarding this letter, please contact Dr. Kendall Houlihan, Associate Director, Division of Animal Welfare, at 847-285-6685 or [khoulhan@avma.org](mailto:khoulihan@avma.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janet D. Donlin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Janet D. Donlin, DVM, CAE  
Executive Vice President and Chief Executive Officer

<sup>1</sup> Ruch-Gallie R, Hellyer PW, Schoenfeld-Tacher R, et al. Survey of practices and perceptions regarding feline onychectomy among private practitioners. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2016;249(3):291-298.



# Important things to consider when making the decision **DECLAW...OR NOT?**

**Scratching is a normal behavior of cats.** It conditions the claws, serves as a visual and scent territorial marker, allows the cat to defend itself, and provides healthy muscle engagement through stretching. In many cases, a cat can be trained to scratch only appropriate surfaces. However, a cat's excessive or inappropriate scratching behavior can become destructive or cause injury to people in the home.

## ALTERNATIVE TRAINING AND MANAGEMENT OPTIONS

- Providing appropriate scratching surfaces, such as dedicated posts and boards that are tall enough to encourage full stretching. What constitutes an attractive surface or location varies by cat, so don't be afraid to get creative! Scenting with catnip may help too.
- Frequent nail trims - every 1-2 weeks
- Nail caps - replaced every 4-6 weeks
- Positive reinforcement training, beginning with kitten kindergarten if available
- Pheromone sprays and/or plug-ins
- Discourage use of inappropriate surfaces by attaching sticky tape or tinfoil
- Punishment is not an effective deterrent

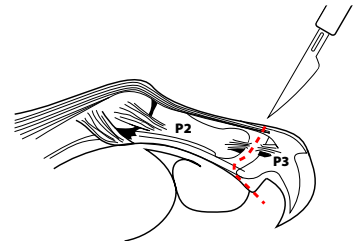
## WHEN THE ALTERNATIVES AREN'T ENOUGH

When undesirable scratching is not able to be successfully managed, or a member of the household is immunocompromised with a higher risk of health complications as a result of accidental scratches, declawing may be the only alternative to relinquishment or euthanasia. While not a first choice, nor a minor procedure, if properly performed declawing may allow a pet cat to remain in an otherwise good home.

Declawing is the surgical amputation of a cat's claws and the third toe bones to which they are attached.

Most cats will still exhibit scratching behavior after declawing. If performed,

this elective orthopedic surgery requires general anesthesia and comprehensive pain management under the care of an experienced veterinarian. Like any major surgical procedure, possible complications include short- and long-term pain, bleeding, infection, and wound reopening.



## MAKE A THOUGHTFUL CHOICE

Because elective declawing is performed for the benefit of the owner rather than the cat, the procedure remains controversial. The decision to have a cat declawed should be carefully considered in consultation with your veterinarian. Declawing should only be performed after reasonable behavior modification attempts and alternatives have been exhausted. Declawed cats should not be allowed outdoors, unless they are under direct supervision.

To learn more visit [avma.org/declaw](https://avma.org/declaw)