



ANIMAL LEGAL DEFENSE
LEGISLATIVE FUND

March 3, 2025

Representative Robert E. Craven, Chair
Representative Carol Hagan McEntee, First Vice Chair
Representative Jason Knight, Second Vice Chair
House Judiciary Committee
Rhode Island General Assembly
82 Smith Street, Providence, RI 02903

Re: Support for legislation to ban cat declawing — *An Act Relating To Animals And Animal Husbandry -- Cruelty To Animals* (HB 5668 and SB 180)

Honorable Chair Craven, Vice Chairs Hagan McEntee and Knight, and Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

On behalf of the Animal Legal Defense Legislative Fund and our supporters in Rhode Island, thank you for this opportunity to submit a letter of support for *An Act Relating To Animals And Animal Husbandry -- Cruelty To Animals* (HB 5668 and SB 180), sponsored in the House by Representative William O'Brien. Known as a "declaw ban," this legislation would prohibit declawing of cats the procedure is medically necessary to address a condition in the claws, nail bed, or toe bone that compromises the cat's health.

The Animal Legal Defense Legislative Fund works in legislatures across the country to protect the lives and advance the interests of animals by passing animal protection laws, supporting animal-friendly candidates, and empowering grassroots advocates. As a core component of our work, we advocate for laws that prioritize animals' well-being and respect for their natural behaviors, such as declaw bans.

This declaw ban will bring Rhode Island in line with modern day veterinary science and perspectives on the humane treatment of animals. All too often, animals suffer for the sake of human desires and preferences. In the case of cat declawing, the supposed convenience of stopping a cat's natural behavior of scratching is actually a highly invasive surgical procedure that can cause a cat's a lifetime of pain and discomfort as well as lead to behavioral issues such as biting.

We urge the advancement of legislation to protect cats from declawing, a cruel and outdated practice that is unnecessary except in rare cases to protect a cat's health, such as a diagnosis of cancer of the nail bed. There are exemptions for such cases in the legislation.

Declaw surgical procedure

Declawing or "onychectomy" is a highly invasive surgery involving a series of amputations of the last bones (in whole or in part) of the ten front and sometimes also the eight rear toes of a cat. This procedure does not just involve a cat's claws. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) states it "should be regarded as major surgery." Declawing is similar to severing a human finger at the last knuckle. The procedure is commonly performed for human convenience rather than for the cat's well-being. For example, many people have their cats declawed to prevent them from scratching furniture. Besides post-surgical pain and the inability to perform natural behaviors like scratching, there are other negative implications for well-being associated with declawing.

Medical and behavioral implications of declawing

A recent study published in the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* found that declawing has a detrimental effect on cats' well-being,¹ including:

- a clear association between declawing and the presence of deleterious side effects after the typical postoperative period in a comparatively large sample population; and
- a significant increase in the odds of developing adverse behaviors, including biting, barbering, aggression, and inappropriate elimination, as well as signs of back pain, among declawed cats.

Complications from the surgery itself include "anesthetic complications, hemorrhage, infection and pain." And, after the recovery period, declawing can cause lifelong physical and behavioral problems. Declawing can cause permanent disability. Specifically, a declawed cat is at risk of pain in the paw, lameness, infection, dead tissue, nerve damage, bone spurs, and back pain. Cats are naturally digitigrades (meaning animals who walk on their toes). Declawing changes the way that a cat walks, and over time, this imbalance can also cause chronic pain. If the nail is not removed properly, it can regrow, an incredibly painful process for cats.

Since declawing inhibits a cat's normal means of movement and defense, behavioral impacts can also result. Declawing can interfere with litterbox use. It can also lead to biting because cats have been stripped of their primary defense mechanism (their claws). Declawing fundamentally hinders a cat's natural instincts to use their claws to stretch, scratch, and mark territory.

There is no evidence that declawing reduces shelter admissions. In fact, the behavioral implications, such as problems with litterbox use and biting, are common reasons cats are surrendered. Unsurprisingly, all major organizations dedicated to animal protection organizations oppose declawing. A primary (or substantial) goal of many of these organizations is to reduce the killing of healthy companion animals in shelters.

Alternatives to declawing

Scratching is a normal, healthy behavior for cats. Scratching is not intended to be destructive. Cats scratch because it is an effective way to stretch their back muscles, relieves stress, enables cats to mark their territory, and keeps their nails in good condition. Cat nails have layers, called "husks." Scratching removes those outer layers to make room for newer, stronger nails.

Behavioral training and nail trimming are humane ways to reduce unwanted effects of scratching. There are extensive online resources about training your cat to use a scratching post or similar item instead of your furniture. Offering a variety of attractive materials to scratch (such as cardboard or carpet) in different positions (upright or horizontal) is also effective. Keeping nails trimmed is another important course of action. Additional options are to cover furniture, use deterrent sprays, or restrict a cat's access to certain rooms within the home.

Existing declaw bans

New York, Maryland, and neighboring Massachusetts are the first states to ban declawing cats. (Virginia passed a similar law but with a concerning loophole.) Major U.S. cities have also banned declawing, including Washington DC, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Austin, Denver, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and more. Multiple Canadian provinces and over twenty countries around the world, including the U.K., France, Germany, Spain, Israel, and Brazil, have also banned the practice.

¹ https://pawproject.org/pdfs-resources/MORAN_IFMS_FINAL.pdf

Support for declaw bans to protect public health

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does not support declawing cats. Its website outlines how ill and immune-compromised individuals can live safely with their companion cats and does not include declawing in its list of recommendations for reducing cat scratching. Instead, the CDC recommends avoiding rough play and trimming cats' nails frequently. Furthermore, guidelines about living with HIV, jointly produced by the CDC, the National Institutes of Health, and the HIV Medicine Association of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, states "declawing is not advised."

Additionally, the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) explains, "current research demonstrates the greater value of proper hygiene and parasite control in the prevention of most common zoonoses (i.e., diseases spread from animal to humans)" as compared to cat declawing.

Support for declaw bans to protect the health and well-being of cats

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) strongly opposes declawing as an elective procedure, noting there are "inherent risks and complications with declawing that increase with age such as acute pain, infection, nerve trauma, as well as long term complications like lameness, behavioral problems, and chronic neuropathic pain."

The AVMA strongly advises against declaw; the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association (HSVMA), and the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) oppose the practice as an alternative to relinquishment. Additionally, more and more veterinarians are refusing to perform this procedure on ethical grounds, citing that it is an invasive convenience surgery. The largest privately owned veterinary practice in the United States, with over a thousand clinics nationwide, Banfield Pet Hospitals, recently stopped offering elective declaw surgeries and strongly opposes the procedure.

In conclusion, declawing is a highly invasive surgical procedure with serious medical and behavioral implications. Effective alternatives to declawing exist, and a growing number of veterinarians, veterinary practice groups, and other professional organizations as well as state and local governments are phasing out declawing except in rare cases of medical necessity to protect a cat's health. For the foregoing reasons, we strongly encourage the advancement of this important animal protection legislation in the legislative process.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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