



Expand Access to Veterinary Telemedicine SUPPORT SB 3180 & HB 7020

THE ISSUE

All 50 states have laws that empower physicians to use telehealth as an additional tool to establish new doctor-patient relationships and treat patients, including babies and other nonverbal patients,¹ no face-to-face visit required. However, outdated Rhode Island law does not enable veterinarians to use telehealth technology to establish a new patient relationship.

The veterinary industry is facing a critical shortage of professionals in the workforce, and Rhode Island families and shelters are struggling to access care for animals. Research demonstrates that at least a third of pets do not see a veterinarian regularly,² often because their families confront significant obstacles to obtaining veterinary care such as transportation issues, finances, or because they live in an area with few or no veterinary services available.³ Especially when combined, these factors can force devoted pet owners to make difficult decisions to forgo care or make the difficult decision to rehome or relinquish their pets. When animals are relinquished to shelters, it increases the financial burdens on our local communities.

EXISTING LAW

Rhode Island law is unclear on whether veterinarians may establish a VCPR using telehealth technology. According to RI Gen L § 5-25-2, a valid VCPR requires that the veterinarian “has recently seen and is personally acquainted with the keeping and care of the animals.” Federal law requires an examination-based VCPR only for extralabel drug or veterinary feed drug prescriptions;⁴ in all other situations, including for the prescription of all animal drugs approved for use in animals, the state VCPR governs the practice of veterinary medicine within the state.

THE PROPOSAL

Telemedicine is a proven, safe, convenient means for delivering care. As we have seen in the human healthcare field, telemedicine helps bridge gaps in care created by workforce shortages and other barriers to healthcare access. In many situations, a physical exam may not be necessary—like parasite prevention and treatment, itchy skin or ears, hospice, nutritional or behavioral consultations, and more⁵—and a clinic visit can be a serious barrier to care for many pet owners.

SB 3180/HB 7020 will clarify and modernize state law to expand veterinary telehealth access. The legislation will empower highly educated, Rhode Island-licensed veterinarians to establish a veterinarian-client-patient-relationship (VCPR) through real-time audio-video technology and assess when pets need to have an in-person examination as well as those situations when veterinary telemedicine would be an appropriate treatment decision, an approach that safely expanded access for pets and their owners in Rhode Island during the COVID-19 pandemic. This legislation prohibits controlled substance prescribing over telehealth, limits the duration of other prescriptions, and contains additional safeguards: state license and regulation governance, same standards of care as in-person, sound judgment, records maintenance, and price transparency. This legislation will give veterinarians another tool to reach more patients and help many more Rhode Island pets and their families access safe, convenient veterinary telehealth care.

SUPPORT

Potter League for Animals, Rhode Island SPCA, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), Providence Animal Rescue League (PARL), Providence Animal Control, Partnership for Expanded Telemedicine Services (PETS), Friends of Animals in Need, Volunteer Services for Animals, Vintage Pet Rescue, & Animal Rescue Rhode Island

¹ <https://www.ama-assn.org/system/files/2018-10/ama-chart-telehealth-patient-physician-relationship.pdf>

² Larkin, Malinda. New, old challenges beg for radical change in veterinary profession. 2020 Dec 15. JAVMA News.

Gallup. “52% of U.S. Pet Owners Skipped or Declined Veterinary Care.” April 16, 2025. Available at:

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/659057/pet-owners-skipped-declined-veterinary-care.aspx> Accessed January 22, 2026.

³ Program for Pet Health Equity. “Access to Veterinary Care: Barriers and Insights from Pet Families.” August 29, 2025.

⁴ 21 Fed. Reg. 530; 21 Fed. Reg. 558.6

⁵ <https://vvca.org/member-resources/virtual-care-guides/>