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Animal Welfare in SC – Listening Meeting

Thank you, Senators, for your valuable time. My name is Dr. Sarah Boyd. I have been a practicing veterinarian in SC for over 10 years. I have worked in private practices in Beaufort and Mount Pleasant, SC, and have been a shelter veterinarian for 6 years. I am currently the Director of Shelter Health and Wellness at the Charleston Animal Society. I am a member of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Trident Veterinary Medical Association of which I was recently the president, and the national Association of Shelter Veterinarians. Last year I was awarded a fellowship in shelter medicine with the University of California at Davis, through a grant from the ASPCA, where I studied how to improve housing and welfare for animals in shelters. I am an expert in the field of shelter medicine and animal welfare. And that is why I am speaking to you today.

The animal welfare problems in the state of SC are vast, as in most other states in the southeast. But I want to share with you my perspective as a taxpayer, a voter, a veterinarian, a shelter medicine expert, and an animal welfare advocate.

There is no other workforce group ever besides those individuals that work in animal shelters who took their job because they care about their “client”, if you will, and are then asked to kill that client that they have taken care of for weeks or months. Veterinarians perform euthanasia for patients that are suffering and there is no further treatment that can be done. In all of SC except the Charleston Animal Society, animal shelter staff perform euthanasia not for suffering, but because too many are coming in their doors.

The animals that come in their doors are 10’s of thousands of puppies and kittens born unwanted, puppies with parvo – a preventable disease if vaccinated, puppies with distemper – a preventable disease if vaccinated, dogs bred multiple times and discarded sometimes still lactating, hounds that are skin and bones with black paint and numbers on their sides, dogs kept on a chain all their lives that are so un-socialized to human touch that the only response they know is to aggress out of fear, dogs with collars worn into their necks, dogs that were used as bait dogs, dogs that were used as fighting dogs, dogs and cats hit by cars with broken backs, dogs and cats hit by cars weeks ago with infected, open wounds, and 100’s of thousands of cats to be housed in 2 foot by 2 foot cages, just to name a few. This,

we can all agree, is a burden! The role of animal shelters in SC is to take on this burden from its citizens, and try to make some good come from it. Why would we want to add to this burden?

In reading its most current version, House Bill 3492 adds to this burden. If less spays and neuters are performed and less distemper and parvo vaccinations are given, this additional burden will mean more unwanted animals, more animals not vaccinated for preventable diseases, and more intake for shelters, meaning more death of animals in the state of SC.

Since at the front counter of each animal shelter, they cannot ask the person whether they are low-income or not, and only choose who to take in based on that, then why would we place the burden on the shelter or spay-neuter clinic to determine who is low-income before an animal is spayed or neutered? The day that shelters are allowed to qualify who comes in, will be the day I support qualifying who gets spayed and neutered! If the shelters are where we see parvo and distemper walking in the door, then why would we limit a shelter veterinarian's ability to give these life-saving vaccinations? This is population medicine, which is very different from individual medicine. Every vaccination given, at a veterinary clinic, at a spay-neuter clinic, at a shelter, by a mobile clinic is lessening the likelihood these preventable diseases walk in our doors. And as a veterinarian in the state of SC, I would move out of state if a law is passed that dictates my choices in practicing medicine and violates my client-patient-veterinary relationships. If passed, House Bill 3492 would dictate how I practice medicine and deny my client-patient-veterinary relationships.

If this problem is "really in the upstate" or "really in Columbia", then why make this state-wide? All veterinarians practice under the Veterinary Practice Act and all shelters are governed by existing laws. If you want to improve those sheltering laws, I want to share with you some resources that shelters and shelter veterinarians around the nation use. The Association of Shelter Veterinarians had some of the same concerns about what are good and what are harmful practices in animal shelters. They assembled a national panel of experts and created a document called the Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters. And they also created the Guidelines for Standards of Care in Spay-Neuter Clinics which was published in the Journal of the AVMA. I have given you each a copy of both that are yours to keep. If you want to improve conditions in animal shelters and spay-neuter clinics, use these documents. Base your criteria on what is already established by the experts in the field.

If a group of veterinarians in this state is worried about "botched" surgeries coming from spay neuter clinics, then why is their solution to offer those surgeries to only those considered economically disadvantaged? That solution is discriminatory and hurtful. It is hurtful to those disadvantaged and hurtful to the animals they are concerned about. Put some action behind your concern. File a complaint against that veterinarian through the state system that is already in place through LLR and the SC Veterinary Medical Examiners Board.

If a group of veterinarians are worried that some non-profit organizations are working outside of their mission, ask for the organization's financial records, as they are by law public access, and request an IRS examination. Don't involve the animal shelters that are working within their mission.

It is very simple, but I was taught in my academic training to first identify the problem and then offer a solution. In this listening meeting many problems will be illuminated. Please, as wise statesmen and women, don't accept a solution if it does not solve the problem. Work to end suffering and homelessness for the animals in SC and allow the experts in their field to do this.

I would like to offer to be a member of any committee formed to address animal welfare in the state of SC and in animal shelters. Please find my business card attached to your documents. Thank you for your time and attention tonight.