



Thank you for the opportunity to address our concerns on HB 4910 and 4911. The Humane Society of Huron Valley is a private, not-for-profit organization created in 1896 that provides a wide range of animal welfare and pet owner support services. Each year we serve roughly 14,000 animals. We have over 100 employees and nearly 3000 active volunteers. We have a 96% save rate and have received multiple awards for our leadership, innovative programs, and life-saving services.

We have extensive experience working with pet owners who are low-income and those who are struggling with mental health challenges. Many of our services – including education, free behavior advice, free pet food, low-cost veterinary care, temporary harbor – are designed to help at-risk families keep their beloved companion. We offer such services not only to prevent animals from entering a shelter, but also we believe in the strength of the human/animal bond and the importance of keeping animals in the loving homes in which they currently live. And indeed, so does science.

Studies show that living with a companion animal:

- Helps reduce stress, anxiety and other disorders;
- Helps reduce depression, and particularly in older adults, by combating feelings of isolation and loneliness;
- Helps manage emotions and distract those with severe mental health conditions (such as depression, bipolar disorder, PTSD and schizophrenia) from painful symptoms such as hearing voices and having suicidal thoughts;
- Requires a level of physical activity and connection with the outside world that supports better mental health;
- And increases a sense of overall well-being.

You may be surprised to know that the inability to find pet-friendly housing is consistently one of the top reasons that people surrender animals to our shelter. Each year, we see devastated families forced to give up their animals in order to secure housing. We've witnessed that losing a beloved pet can cause such intense grief that it leads to depression and suicidal thoughts. While there may be legitimate frustration with and need to shut down disingenuous online sites offering ESA certification, it is well worth noting that this cottage industry is simply exploiting the tragic situation caused by a lack of pet-friendly rental housing.

These bills are misguided. Instead of targeting unscrupulous business practices or instead of fixing the problems experienced by pet-owning renters, they target— through excessive burden, intimidation and discrimination—vulnerable individuals with serious mental health needs.

Overly onerous

Requiring that prescriptions for an Emotional Support Animal come from a provider who has been seeing a patient in-state for six months takes none of the many harsh and common realities around inadequacy of care into consideration.

- It is no secret that our state and nation are experiencing a mental health crisis. This crisis is partly related to the difficult nature of accessing and maintaining adequate care within a system plagued by long waits, a lack of providers, prohibitive bureaucracy, fragmentation and disruption in continuity. Hospitalizations, changes in symptoms, job loss, change in insurance coverage, divorce, homelessness and a myriad of other reasons frequently cause individuals to lose their existing provider and to search for a new one – a search that can easily take months.
- By definition, individuals experiencing serious mental health conditions struggle with emotional and cognitive challenges that often cause a lack the wherewithal and other internal resources necessary to find and maintain needed care in a prompt and consistent manner. Symptoms also make it difficult to navigate complicated rules around housing.

- Those experiencing serious mental health symptoms are much more likely to suffer employment problems, become trapped in poverty, and experience relationships problems that lead to divorce or rejection from family and friends. It is common for people to need to relocate to areas closer to needed services or communities with more affordable housing. This lack of resources and support and forced transiency add to the difficulty in accessing and maintaining care.
- Mental illness can strike anyone at any time. It is not static condition like eye color that one is born with and it is not something people plan for. But when treatment is sought it does not take six months for a provider to diagnose and create a starting treatment plan that might include an ESA.

Intimidation

These bills target a vulnerable population, such as those with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, who may already be suffering from disabling anxiety, worry and fear. Threats of punishment, including fines, jail time, and eviction will needlessly scare individuals who have a real and serious need and may keep them from legitimately acquiring an ESA.

Discrimination

Mental disabilities should be treated no differently than physical disabilities. The requirements and penalties should be comparable. As there is no requirement about length of patient/provider relationship and detailed descriptions of symptoms related to physical disabilities, there should be no additional requirements made of those suffering mental health conditions.

Invasion of Privacy

This legislation requires providers to divulge extensive private medical and personal information on diagnosis and symptoms. While HIPPA compliance has been added, all landlords ~~big and small~~, would now be required to implement extensive and costly changes before private medical data is shared. HIPPA compliance requires not just staff training, but establishment and adherence to technical, physical and administrative security measures that will surely be a challenge forte smaller landlords.

Our nation already faces a homelessness and mental health crisis, with suicide rates at an all-time high. These bills hurt the wrong people at the wrong time. They target and intimidate the most vulnerable among us, those who have an acute need for an emotional support animal, and who have the least resources to access adequate care, jump through bureaucratic hoops and ~~fight~~ advocate on their own behalf.

As such, we also believe that this legislation will further hurt Michigan's already strained and underfunded animal homeless shelters by increasing demands on the system and potentially causing an increase in unnecessary euthanasia.

While we appreciate the attempt to address bogus online providers, we believe these bills mostly injure vulnerable, low-income, or insecurely housed individuals and families. And the unintended consequences of these bills will increase both human and animal homelessness. Instead, we urge you to target fraudulent online sources and seek to address the lack of pet-friendly rental housing and breed restrictions that are hurting pet-loving Michiganders and their animals.

Please vote no on these bills.