

Date of Hearing: April 29, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

AB 1999 (Kalra) – As Amended March 19, 2026

Policy Committee: Business and Professions Vote: 19 - 0

Urgency: No State Mandated Local Program: Yes Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill creates a new “shelter veterinarian license” category for a licensee who practices veterinary medicine solely for an animal shelter or under emergency circumstances. This bill also creates new status categories for: (1) “retired volunteer” veterinarians and registered veterinary technicians (RVTs), who will be allowed to practice veterinary medicine or provide services solely for an animal shelter or under emergency circumstances, and (2) “retired” veterinarians and RVTs. The bill also makes changes to the owner exemption and other provisions in the Veterinary Medicine Practice Act (Act).

Specifically, this bill:

- 1) Establishes a “shelter veterinarian” license category and related application requirements, which allow a valid license in any state, US territory, or Canadian province.
- 2) Establishes a “retired status” for veterinarians and RVTs.
- 3) Establishes a “retired volunteer status” for a veterinarian or RVT, including a holder of license or registration in any state, US territory, or Canadian province, to volunteer services at animal shelters, subject to certain continuing education and other requirements.
- 4) Authorizes the California Veterinary Medical Board (CVMB) to charge fees for restoring a license or registration from retired status to active status, for retired volunteer status, and fees related to shelter veterinarian licenses, as specified.
- 5) Narrows the “owner exemption” to specify that an animal owner may not perform any surgical or dental operation, as defined, on their animal.
- 6) Revises requirements related to the establishment and maintenance of a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) to clarify that a VCPR established via in-person examination is valid for 12 months, and a VCPR established via “telehealth” methodologies is valid for six months, subject to certain specifications.
- 7) Makes various conforming and other changes related to the VCPR.
- 8) Replaces references to “telehealth” in the Act with the terms “telemedicine,” “teleconsultation,” and “teletriage” where appropriate.

FISCAL EFFECT:

The CVMB estimates minor and absorbable costs for outreach and education, and a new verification of eligibility on applications.

The Department of Consumer Affairs, Office of Information Services estimates one-time costs of \$132,000 to create a new license application and renewal, along with other minor updates, in the online licensing and enforcement system (Veterinary Medical Board Contingent Fund).

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose.** This bill is co-sponsored by the CVMB, the California Veterinary Medical Association, the San Diego Humane Society, and Social Compassion in Legislation. According to the author:

Despite caring deeply for their animal companions, many Californians struggle to procure the veterinary services they require. Often, this hardship is a consequence of cumbersome statute and the state's ongoing veterinary staffing shortage, which leave many communities without accessible care options. [This bill] addresses these issues by allowing retired veterinary professionals to volunteer their skills at shelters, streamlining licensure for out-of-state veterinarians who wish to work in shelters, and updating [VCPR] statute to allow veterinarians to provide care without re-establishing an existing VCPR. Together, these provisions will remove many of the barriers that currently prevent countless companion animals from receiving the veterinary care they need and deserve.

- 2) **Background. *Veterinary Care Shortage.*** According to information provided by the author, California is in the midst of a dire veterinary care shortage. Animal shelters are especially affected by this deficit, with recent data demonstrating that 25% lack adequate veterinary staffing and 64% cannot meet their animals' basic medical needs. In 2023, the Legislature passed ACR 86 (Kalra), which highlighted the national and statewide pet overpopulation crisis, noting the increase in pet adoptions and purchases throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated overpopulation. ACR 86 also highlighted the lack of low-cost and free spay and neuter options, as well as disparities in access to veterinary care. The resolution made a commitment to pursue policies that increase the availability of low-cost, high volume spay and neuter, specifically calling on more out-of-state veterinarians and RVTs to perform and assist with sterilization.

Owner Exemption. Under existing law, the owner of an animal may perform any act encompassed under veterinary medicine, or authorize their employees or any other person to do so, as long as the other person does not charge the owner for such services. The "owner exemption" was originally intended to allow ranchers and their employees to treat routine livestock issues, such as administration of medications, castrations and dehorning, or minor wound care. The sponsors of this bill contend, however, that the exemption has led to significant patient harm and death. In some cases, a veterinarian accused of causing patient harm or death has used the owner exemption as a defense against complaints of unprofessional conduct, claiming the CVMB has no jurisdiction because they were assisting

the owner and performed services gratuitously—either by never charging for the specific task, or by providing a refund after the fact. In cases where someone other than the owner, often a whistle-blower, reports unlicensed conduct, the CVMB has claimed that animal owners are often uncooperative because they have long-standing relationships with these unlicensed practitioners and appreciate the cheaper services. In such cases, the CVMB is unable to prove that the unlicensed individuals performed the services for a fee. Absent this proof, the unlicensed practitioner remains within the owner exemption.

The CVMB also reports it frequently receives complaints from consumers and the wider veterinary industry that unlicensed individuals are hired by an operation that may be considered the bona fide “owner” of an animal, such as an animal rescue, trade show, polo event, and unsanctioned rodeo. The CVMB received many reports of significant animal patient harm or death in which accused individuals claim to be the owner (in the case of animal rescues), that they are employed by the owner (in the case of polo events, unsanctioned rodeos, and other animal sport settings), or that they assisted the owner and did not charge for the specific service that was deemed negligent. Pursuant to the owner exemption, the CVMB was forced to close such cases for lack of jurisdiction. The CVMB and other sponsors of this bill tailored the owner exemption language to clarify that the exemption does not apply to a surgical or dental operation on an animal and preserves the ability of owners to perform specified activities for livestock and shelter operations.

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