

SUBMITTED TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON INDIAN AND INSULAR
AFFAIRS
REGARDING:
H.R. 8473 – VETERINARY SERVICES TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH IN RURAL
COMMUNITIES ACT
JUNE 9, 2026

Chairman Hurd, Ranking Member Fernandez, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on H.R. 8473, the *Veterinary Services to Improve Public Health in Rural Communities Act*, introduced by our Congressman, Representative Begich.

On behalf of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC), I write in full support of this legislation. ANTHC is a statewide Tribal health organization serving all 229 Tribes and all Alaska Native and American Indian people in Alaska. ANTHC provides a wide range of statewide public health, community health, environmental health, and other programs and services for Alaska Native people and their communities.

Sufficient access to veterinary care is a critical component of public health. Veterinary services, especially those addressing zoonotic disease prevention and animal population control, directly affect human health in rural communities.

The challenges addressed by this legislation are particularly acute in Alaska, where geographic isolation and limited infrastructure contribute to significant health disparities. Aside from sporadic services provided by nonprofit veterinary organizations, there has never been consistent or reliable access to veterinary care in the vast majority of Alaska's rural communities.

Alaska's rural communities experience disproportionately high rates of animal-related injuries. Alaska Native children are hospitalized for dog bites at approximately twice the rate of children in the general population and have the highest rate of dog bite hospitalization within the Indian Health Service system. In the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, reported dog bite rates among children range from seven to nine times the national per capita average. These disparities reflect systemic gaps in prevention capacity and access to basic veterinary services.

Rabies also remains an ongoing and serious public health concern in Alaska. Rabies is enzootic, meaning it is consistently present, in Northern and Western Alaska, creating a persistent risk of transmission from wildlife to domestic animals and humans. Communities in these regions

periodically face acute exposure events, requiring immediate medical intervention due to the lack of upstream prevention capacity in these communities.

In ANTHC's view, these public health challenges are driven primarily by limited access to basic veterinary services. This includes routine rabies vaccination, spay and neuter services to control animal populations, and parasite and disease prevention. Without these services, communities face large populations of free-roaming animals, increased risk of injury and zoonotic disease transmission, and recurring public health emergencies that strain already limited health system resources.

Although these challenges are well known, current federal law limits the ability of the Indian Health Service and Tribal health organizations to adequately address them. Because the Indian Health Service lacks explicit statutory authority to provide or fund veterinary public health services, existing Tribal rabies prevention programs remain limited in scope. Communities are therefore forced to rely on intermittent or external support, and the root causes of animal overpopulation and disease transmission remain largely unaddressed.

H.R. 8473 provides a practical and necessary solution to this longstanding public health gap. In Alaska, the connection between animal health and human health is not theoretical, but clearly demonstrated through elevated rates of dog bite injuries, repeated rabies exposure events, and the ongoing strain on rural health systems. These outcomes are the result of limited access to basic veterinary services and the absence of federal authority to support their delivery.

This legislation brings the necessary tools together by authorizing the Indian Health Service and Tribal health organizations to address the root causes of these challenges through vaccination, population control, and disease prevention, rather than continuing to respond after exposures have already occurred. It also aligns with the principles of Tribal self-determination by allowing Tribes and Tribal organizations to design and implement solutions that reflect local conditions and community needs, particularly in remote and high-risk regions such as Western and Northern Alaska.

Ultimately, H.R. 8473 is about prevention and safety. It ensures that rural Tribal communities have the tools needed to protect both human and animal health in a coordinated and sustainable way.

ANTHC respectfully urges the Subcommittee to advance this legislation.