

The Texas Legislature

Why is it important to know about the Texas Legislature?

The Texas Legislature can have a profound effect on the welfare of animals throughout our state. Every other year, bills are that have the potential to help or harm the animals we all love. Laws that protect animals can help reduce immediate suffering and provide long-lasting prevention of repeated abuses.

Why does legislation matter to animal welfare?

Legislation is the most important way to legitimize animal welfare issues. In many cases, some situations require concrete changes in the law. Before 2007, and Loco's Law, Texas had an extremely weak animal cruelty law in place. Loco was an 8 month old pup stolen from his family's backyard, found days later missing both eyes. Texas law at the time provided only misdemeanor charges with minor consequences. Loco put a face to the weak animal cruelty laws that existed in Texas at that time. Animal abusers are now subject to state felony charges, up to 2 years imprisonment, and can face up to a \$10,000 fine.

Legislation can also help animal issues like overpopulation. The Network helped establish an "animal friendly" pet sterilization fund through the sale of specialty license plates wherein proceeds provide free and low-cost spay/neutering. The Texas "Animal Friendly" plates cost \$30 wherein \$22 goes to the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Animal Friendly Fund to provide grants to eligible organizations to provide low-cost spays and neuters. DSHS has been able to distribute grant funds for spay/neuter surgeries for over 85,869 dogs and cats in Texas thus preventing the unwanted births of millions of cats and dogs. An additional public health benefit is that all of these animals are seen by a veterinarian, in the hope that vaccinations will be administered. By 2014, DSHS has distributed \$5,006,199 in grants towards low-cost spays/neuters. THLN monitors the legislature to ensure funds continue to be used for their intended purpose.

What is the Texas Legislature?

The Texas Legislature is a bi-cameral body composed of a 31-member Senate and a 150-member House of Representatives. It is a powerful arm of the Texas government not only because of its power of the purse to control and direct the activities of state government and the strong constitutional connections between it and the Lieutenant Governor of Texas, but also due to Texas's plural executive.

The state legislature convenes at the Capitol in Austin every other year in odd numbered years (next session is in 2017) for 140 days in duration (approximately 20 weeks). In reality, there are only approximately 95 "workdays". The full chamber (House or Senate) will debate and then vote to kill or pass the bill. Since the Texas legislature is bicameral, bills must pass both bodies and if this happens, the Governor must sign the bill for it to become law.

Why we need an "all hands on deck" approach each session?

Generally, there 5,000-7,000 bills filed within those 140 days and three out of the four bills don't pass. So we need everyone to take action during the session which helps our bills' chances of passing (or failing if it is a bad bill for the animals). Law-makers respond to their constituents thus our grassroots network and your voice is the key to our success!

Does a legislator's party affiliation matter?

No. Animal welfare bills are bipartisan. It is important to understand that the bills the Network supports are common sense and usually brought to us by law enforcement and the animal sheltering communities, trying to fix an existing problem they encounter.

At all times, why is it important to be polite to our Texas legislators?

Legislators often put in hundreds and hundreds of hours during the session and they meet with constituents and continue to work during the off session. It is imperative that when discussing animal welfare bills, you never say things like, "My taxes pay for your salary." In fact, Texas state legislators make around \$600 per month, or \$7,200 per year, plus a per diem of \$150 for every day the Legislature is in session (also including any special sessions). Comments like this or others regarding party affiliations could actually hurt the bills you are asking them to support.