

10 Tips for Advancing Protections for Companion Animals in Local Government

1. Get acquainted with the Virginia Code:

Get to know the [laws at the state level](#). These laws apply to *all Virginia municipalities* and they form the foundation for the management of companion animals across the state. (TIP: Buy a copy of the VA Comprehensive Animal Care Law Book and/or create a web bookmark to the online version of the code so that you can reference this information frequently. The more often you engage with it, the more familiar you will become with it.)

<http://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode> (select Title 3.2 and then Chapter 65)

2. Get acquainted with your Local Code:

- The local code encompasses the State law and any local ordinances the community chooses to enact and it sets the guideline and expectation of the minimal acceptable care for animals.
- The Dillon Rule: limits the authority of counties and cities to enact ordinances for which the state has not given permission to enact. ([§ 3.2-6543. Governing body of any locality may adopt certain ordinances.](#)) The detail in the Dillon Rule is beyond our scope here but the important thing is to be aware of it should it be cited as a reason against your proposal. This is a good reason to focus on ordinances that have been enacted in other cities and counties in Virginia.

Where do I find the local animal code?

- **Municode.com** - If your community contracts with Municode, you'll find the code here under the name of your county, town, or city: <https://www.municode.com/library/va> . In the section for your community, look for the Chapter that pertains to Animals. This will contain most of the codes relevant to companion animals in your community. Though occasionally important information may be contained in other sections of code. If you know of a requirement

or statute that you cannot find, contact your animal control officer or a superior administrator to ask for a reference in the code.

- **If your community isn't listed in the Municode**, then contact the county administrator or city manager to request access to the code (preferably online).
- ### 3. Get to know your community's governing structure and leadership:
- *Most* counties follow a traditional form of government with an elected board of supervisors that meets regularly. Other elected officials include the Sheriff and the Commonwealth's Attorney. There are variations in governing forms so you may want ask your county administrator if you have questions.
 - *Most* cities employ a Council-Mayor structure and *most* towns employ a Council-Manager structure.
 - The important point is that the decisions are made at this level of government and largely by your elected officials. Get acquainted with your local government by attending the public meetings of council and supervisors. Learn what you can about the driving forces and sentiments of your leadership. If possible, learn who, among your leadership may have beloved pets and may be sympathetic to your cause. In small and rural communities, changes will have greatest opportunity for success if they are sought and promoted by native residents of the community and/or individuals who are integrally connected to the community through work and other social connections.
- ### 4. Identify and learn about changes that have been successful in other Virginia communities:
- You are more likely to find support if you focus your efforts on elements of code that other municipalities in the state have successfully implemented. These include:
- Prohibitions on dogs-at-large (e.g. [Chesterfield](#) Sec 4-23, [Powhatan](#) Div 4, Sec 10-116, [Henrico](#) Div 1, Sec 5-29, Caroline)
 - Strengthen definitions of adequate care (e.g. [Albemarle County](#) Sec 4-100)

- Tethering restrictions (e.g. [City of Richmond](#) Sec 10-92 Item 2-d, [Arlington County](#) Sec 2-6.1.)
- Breeding restrictions (e.g. [City of Richmond](#) Div 5: Breeding & Transfer)
- Nuisance laws (e.g. Richmond, Hopewell, Goochland)

5. Be a respectful and professional champion for your cause

- Always be respectful, polite, and honest in your dealings with others.
- Remember that your local administration officials likely have little knowledge about animal law or the needs and issues regarding animal protection.
- It is the responsibility of your elected officials to represent the interests of their community members. This will include you as well as others who may oppose your views. You will need to address opposing concerns so it's important to become acquainted with them.
- It will be up to you to bring key issues into focus in a way that will give your administrators the best ability to take the actions you seek. Be sure that you clearly know what actions you seek and what points or arguments will have the strongest impact and meaning for your administrators.
- A confrontational approach will rarely have the effect you want – which is positive attention and change.

6. Find and develop a support base of community members who support the changes you seek.

A local humane society or animal rescue group may be a good place to start. However, they may be too busy to support local change efforts. Chat up your interests in your daily interactions with co-workers, friends, and on Facebook or other social media you may use. Find out who is sympathetic to your issues and engage their support but be sure they share your emphasis on respectful, professional conduct.

7. Find out what impact changes would have on animal control services and seek support for your changes from the local animal control authority.

If the changes you seek will have a negative impact on animal control, you'll need to understand how. It may be that you can provide information and solutions that address perceived problems. Getting key supporters for your initiatives is important to your success.

8. Develop a “Factsheet” that defines and supports the proposed changes and share this widely.

This will be essential in educating community administrators (and decision-makers) and community members. This should include plenty of factual information and references; clearly articulated needs and benefits; likely financial costs and/or savings to the community; and references to other communities that have enacted similar measures.

9. Present your case:

If possible, find a member of your governing board who will be supportive of your case and guide you as you present your case to the board or council. When your case is presented (either by you or a board/council member) – try to have attendance from as many community supporters as possible.

10. Smile lots! Keep a positive attitude and don't give up – Change takes time!

Find this document online (with live links) at:
www.humanelivingcenter.org/docs/LocalAnimalAdvocacy.pdf

Want help considering or developing your approach?

Contact me: Alice-Leigh alm@myrtlerun.com

Virginia Humane Living Center

www.humanelivingcenter.org