As anyone with a pet can tell you, over the last few years, it’s been a lot harder to access veterinary care for our furry friends. It can take weeks, even months, to get an appointment if the situation isn’t urgent. And emergency veterinary hospitals are seeing wait times of as much as five hours.

There are a few factors that have led up to this crisis. First, there is simply a lack of veterinarians and veterinary techs. Compensation isn’t high, and burnout can lead to veterinary professionals leaving the field. And with just 32 veterinary schools in the U.S. (compared to 155 medical schools), fewer are coming down the pipeline to fill these roles.

By 2030, the U.S. will need nearly 41,000 additional veterinarians and nearly 133,000 credentialed vet techs, according to a recent Mars Veterinary Health report.

There is also the issue of cost and access. Veterinary care can be unaffordable for many people. So much so that their pets may go without care, or their guardians, facing a large bill, will surrender their beloved pet to a shelter. For those without transportation or who live in more rural areas, just getting to the veterinarian can be a huge undertaking.

That’s why California animal welfare organizations throughout the state are holding their collective breath for critical legislation to pass which could make a huge impact. Assembly Bill 1399 empowers licensed California veterinarians to utilize video or even a phone call to assess a pet’s needs when appropriate instead of an in-person examination.

We have seen how successful telehealth can be for people, and there’s no reason it can’t be used for our pets. In fact, during the pandemic, most of us saw our healthcare providers exclusively through telehealth. Some of us even preferred it.

Veterinary exams can be stressful for pets, especially cats. And that stress can mask important issues. A cat resting in their guardian’s lap is going to be much more relaxed than one in a bright, cold exam room (not to mention the car ride).

The San Francisco SPCA reports, “California’s Veterinary Care Accessibility Score has a failing grade of 47 out of 100, according to the Access to Veterinary Care Accessibility Project. And according to a study from Banfield Pet Hospital, an estimated 75 million pets in the U.S. could be without veterinary care by 2030 if we do not update our approach to providing these services.”

It’s not just owned animals that will benefit from this new legislation. Small animal shelters and most rescues don’t have a veterinarian on staff. They must outsource all veterinary care or worse, simply try to care for the animals without it. That means more than 340,000 shelter animals in the state go without adequate medical care.

“We’ve seen an enormous uptake in people contacting our Pet Safety Net program for help,” says Darlene Blackman, director of community engagement at Marin Humane. “This donor-funded program can help struggling pet parents to pay for veterinary care but it’s limited and often what we’re
able to offer isn’t enough. If this bill passes, people will be able to get care for their pets sooner, it won’t be as costly and it’ll allow us to help even more people and their pets.”

The bill has passed in the Assembly and this week, it’ll be up for a vote in the Senate. Four other states have already passed legislation similar to AB 1399 so we’re hopeful California will be next. If you agree, please contact your state senator today and express your support for this important bill.

California time and again has shown itself to be at the forefront of protection for animals. Marin residents in particular show great compassion and respect for its animals. We hope that includes you, too.

Lisa Bloch is the marketing and communications director for Marin Humane, which contributes Tails of Marin articles and welcomes animal-related questions and stories about the people and animals in our community. Go to marinhumane.org, find us on social media @marinhumane, or email lbloch@marinhumane.org.