

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Francisco Maia, PT, DPT, CCRT

The Animal SIG would like to keep you informed of the incredible work and advances being done in California in terms of Animal Physical Therapy. To provide an update, Karen Atlas has written the following article.

RIGHTING THE WRONG IN CALIFORNIA ANIMAL HEALTHCARE POLITICS: AB 814 WOULD SAFELY EXPAND ACCESS TO ANIMAL PHYSICAL THERAPY

Karen Atlas, PT, MPT, CCRT

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Animal healthcare politics have heated up in California! Animal lovers are hopeful and eager to see change on the horizon. This is an update to my previous article, [How Politics and Self-Interest Thwarted Positive Regulatory Change for California Consumers and their Animals:...a Call to Action!](#) (Orthopaedic Practice Vol. 34/number 2/ 2022)

AB 814 addresses a mounting crisis in access to healthcare services for California pet owners. The cause for the crisis is multifaceted, but one reason is simple supply and demand. The steep increase in pet ownership since the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with a relative decline in the number of practicing veterinarians, has led to long wait times for veterinary appointments, out-the-door lines at emergency clinics, and practices closing their doors to new patients. This is a nationwide problem, but in California there is a bright spot: AB 814 will make one area of animal care *more* accessible, specifically animal physical therapy (APT) so more lives can be touched and improved.

AB 814 would:

- Provide consumers with more choice of and access to qualified physical therapists certified in animal rehabilitation.
- Lead to economic and business growth (as evidenced by the thriving rehabilitation industry in states like Colorado).
- Increase competition within the marketplace to keep prices for rehab services from skyrocketing.
- Promote inter-professional collaboration between PTs and DVMs and improve the way rehab services are delivered.
- Allow mobile animal physical therapist practitioners to reach rural areas and provide house calls for those who cannot travel to a clinic.
- Allow equine veterinarians to refer their animal patients to qualified equine physical therapists. There is a large unmet need for horse rehabilitation.
- Break the current rehab monopoly and prevent anti-trust/restraint of trade litigation within the field as it relates to animal rehabilitation (Precedent has been set in North Carolina Board of Dental Examiners vs. Federal Trade Commission Supreme Court case in 2015)

INTRODUCTION OF AB 814: THE ANIMAL PHYSICAL THERAPY ACT OF 2024 (COOPER'S LAW)

AB 814 was introduced in California early this year. This critical piece of legislation passed the full Assembly handily with bipartisan support (Assembly Business and Professions Committee 14-1, Assembly Appropriations Committee 12-3, Assembly Floor 66-2).

AB 814—The Animal Physical Therapy Act of 2024 is authored by Assembly Member Josh Lowenthal (D-Long Beach).

At its heart, AB 814 will allow veterinarians to refer their animal patients to a qualified animal physical therapist, expanding access to APT for pets recovering from surgery, injuries, and managing chronic conditions (including age-related issues). It's not just pets that will benefit. California has a large population of working animals who serve our state, including search-and-rescue, law enforcement, airport security, drug/contraband detection as well as ranch herding and guardian dogs, and horses who need to be in top physical condition for their work. APT returns these essential working animals to their duties sooner should they get injured.

And let's not forget about canine and equine athletes, emotional support dogs, personal protection dogs, and specialty service dogs like guide dogs for the blind. This piece of legislation has far reaching positive benefits for so many sectors of our society, and the people and animals of California.

Key Provisions of AB 814:

- Additional education mandates for physical therapists: The physical therapists providing this care would be required to be properly trained in animal-specific coursework to ensure competency and protect consumers from unqualified practitioners.
- State registry is established: Only qualified animal physical therapists would be registered with the State.
- Veterinary referral is necessary: After an animal's veterinarian has established a Veterinary-Client-Patient-Relationship (VCPR), examined and diagnosed a pet, and determined physical rehab is safe and appropriate, they can refer their animal patient to a qualified animal physical therapist.
- Veterinary supervision is required: Once the animal has been referred to an animal physical therapist, rehab services would be rendered under either direct supervision (veterinarian must be on the same premises) or indirect supervision (veterinarian may be offsite). The veterinarian determines the level of supervision on a case-by-case basis.
- Liability is addressed: AB 814 makes clear that liability is placed on the treating therapist and not the referring veterinarian.

The Animal Physical Therapy Coalition (APTC) is sponsoring Assembly Bill 814. The broad stakeholder contingent that makes up the Coalition includes veterinarians, physical therapists, registered veterinary technicians, leading educators, search and rescue/law enforcement handlers, as well as the most important stakeholder of all...pet parents.



In addition to the thousands of individuals who have shown support in the form of petition signatures, donations, and letters, there are now over 50 non-profit and professional entities which have joined the effort—including one of the nation's leading animal welfare organizations, Best Friends Animal Society. Prominent and leading board-certified veterinary surgeons and neurologists have also joined this effort, understanding that

cooperation and collaboration ultimately benefits animals by expanding access to vital physical rehabilitative care. Improved professional unity will also advance our shared commitment to care for the companion and working animals in our communities. The growing list of Coalition supporters can be found at: [APTC supporters](#)

While a widespread and diverse coalition supports the bill, AB 814 is opposed by a narrow contingency of naysayers who seemingly either do not fully understand the language in the bill, or have other interests at stake, including financial ones. The Veterinary Medical Board (CVMB) and the California Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) both remain opposed to AB 814. Their official positions are in stark contrast to the faith and support of many of their members and California consumers who understand AB 814 is all about common sense, collaboration, and improving access to care for animals. Despite the minority opposition, the bill remains favorable among legislators.

CVMB ATTEMPTS TO DISCREDIT APTC: MAKES SUDDEN CHANGE IN POLICY NARRATIVE

The CVMB leadership has attempted to discredit the Animal Physical Therapy Coalition's efforts. Their claim involves weaving a change in narrative into the dialogue. They say that CVMB's regulation enacted in 2022 changed nothing about the level of supervision required for a non-veterinarian to perform animal physical rehabilitation (APR).

They accused the APTC of misleading policy makers when APTC stated that the board's regulation reduced access to rehab

care by making it more difficult for qualified physical therapists to provide animal physical rehab services in California.

However, prior to the regulation, APR was not defined in California statute or board regulation. Thus, it was historically understood that *if* APR is to be considered the practice of veterinary medicine, *then* it could be performed by unlicensed assistants at the level of supervision determined by the veterinarian—whether that be under direct or indirect supervision.

The regulation dramatically changed that landscape; first, by defining APR/APT as the practice of veterinary medicine (vs the practice of physical therapy). Second, the regulation changed the supervision level and allowed indirect or direct supervision for RVTs, *but required direct supervision for everyone else, including qualified animal PTs*. Remember: Animal physical therapists have yet to be named legitimate providers of animal rehab services in the practice act, so we remain in the legal category of “unlicensed veterinary assistant.” This was the change that specifically put previously existing and LEGAL practices out of compliance when the regulation was enacted. To date, the board has failed to respond to queries made regarding their sudden change in narrative that first began in August/September 2020 during the regulatory process. ([APTC letter in response to the CVMB attempt to discredit not only myself but the entire Coalition as well](#))

AB 814 is in the California State Senate; Extends to a 2-Year Bill

Ultimately, we have made AB 814 a 2-year bill in the legislative process to make sure we get it right. In close collaboration with Assembly Member Josh Lowenthal, the Coalition will work this Fall over the legislative Recess to strengthen the bill to ensure we are increasing access to care, providing the services we are trained to perform, and to ensure we are reducing the cost to implement the bill given California's ongoing budget deficit. Though this will take more time than originally hoped, we believe extending this bill into 2024 is necessary to accomplish all our goals. We are encouraged by and incredibly appreciative of the hard work done to date by Asm. Lowenthal, and the Assembly and Senate Committees. We are hopeful for the solution being signed into law in 2024!

Need for Continued Advocacy: How to Help

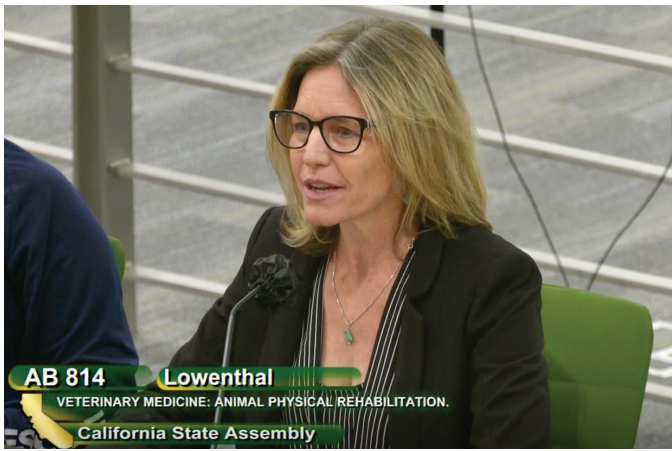
We have made extraordinary progress this year in getting AB 814 through the Assembly. But we still need to get it passed through the Senate in the upcoming legislative year (3 different stages—Senate Business, Professions, and Economic Development Committee, Senate Appropriations Committee, Full Senate Floor). Then we will need Governor Newsom's signature. It's not an overnight process to pass a Bill, but the wait will be well worth it.

There are several ways to help advocate for this cause. We need your continued support. I am so grateful for everyone who has contributed! Your united effort and action have made this a tremendously successful campaign so far.

Here are 3 ways to help:

- **GIVE:** Because this effort will extend into 2024, this also means more fundraising is necessary. Running an effective advocacy effort is expensive. It costs money to hire lobbyists, lawyers, and to pay travel expenses for members to attend policy meetings. Contribute by check or online at [GO FUND ME: CLICK HERE](#)





- **WRITE:** A letter writing campaign is underway for the Senate Committee on Business, Professions, and Economic Development. Letters must be submitted to the legislative portal ([Instructions on how to submit letter--CLICK HERE](#)) Note: Previous letters cannot be re-sent because their content is no longer current. New letters are needed at each step in the process.
- **SHARE:** Let's shine a bright light on animal physical therapy and the increased access AB 814 will allow! Growing public awareness translates into legislators hearing this issue matters to voters! Share widely on social media platforms. Follow and Share on Facebook: [Animal Physical Therapy Coalition](#).

The time is now. Let's move our shared professional values forward by supporting the advocacy work essential to changing minds and laws. The Coalition is so encouraged by the unprecedented outpouring of support from a wide array of interests. We remain committed, engaged, and eager, working our way patiently through the legislative process to get AB 814 over the finish line. Join us so more animals can get the care they need in California. And since California often influences other state policy makers, getting it right here will likely make a profound positive impact for our professional future nationwide.

*In it together,
Karen*

*Karen Atlas, PT, MPT, CCRT
President: Animal Physical Therapy Coalition*

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