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Sponsor Testimony for House Bill 523
March 7, 2018
Before the House Community and Family Advancement Committee**

Chairman Ginter, Vice Chair LaTourette, Ranking Member Boyd, and members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 523. House Bill 523 focuses on the safety and well-being of our Ohio families by addressing three issues: Mandatory animal abuse reporting by current non-reporters, mandatory child abuse and domestic violence reporting to Family Advocacy Programs on military installations, and minor changes to social worker licensing laws. I will speak on the first two topics, while my joint sponsor, Representative Perales, will speak on the third.

The Boston Strangler, the Son of Sam killer, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Ted Bundy all have more in common than being serial killers. Luke Woodham, Kip Kinkel, and Nikolas Cruz all have more in common than being school shooters. And the Texas church mass shooter and the Westerville cop killer have more in common than their violent rampages and their histories of domestic violence. All of these killers had a history of animal abuse.

Violent criminals often start their bloodthirsty behavior with animals. In fact, one police officer I spoke with said this how they often get their courage. Woodham, the school shooter, before opening fire on his classmate, spoke of the slaughtering of his pet dog, Sparkle, as his first kill. One of Nikolas Cruz's classmates in Florida observed Cruz tormenting animals. In fact, several of the high profile school shooters have documented histories of animal abuse.

Also well documented in the domestic violence arena, is the link between animal abuse and the various forms of domestic violence from partner abuse to child abuse to elder abuse. Women living in shelters were 11 times more likely to report that their partners had hurt or killed their pets than a similar cohort of women. Parents who abuse the family pet are known to abuse their kids as well. Children who witness such abuse are at greater risk of becoming abusers themselves, as well as suffering through the trauma of watching their beloved pet get harmed. And while the link to elder abuse is less studied, more than 35% of respondents in a study reported that clients seen by Adult Protective Services (APS) spoke about pets having been threatened, injured, killed or denied care by a caregiver.

In 2016, the National Sheriff's Association pushed the FBI to start a database of animal abusers precisely because they knew the link between animal abuse and other forms of violence was so strong. Their view, along with ours, is that if we can catch and stop abusers in their tracks early on, we might be able to prevent other forms of violence, such as child abuse, serial killings and mass shootings. When I spoke to a social worker's association, I thought they might be a bit resistant to the bill. In fact, the reaction was quite the opposite. They were grateful that they now had an opportunity to report animal abuse cases in homes where they

often suspected other forms of abuse. Currently, they are reluctant to report animal abuse out of fear that they may violate privacy laws.

I have also spoken with several veterinarians who told me that when they suspect animal abuse they report to local humane agents in order to protect not only the animal, but also others in the home. The full veterinary community is paying attention to the link as well. In a survey of all North American veterinary schools, 97% of school administrators reported that they believe that practitioners will encounter serious animal abuse during their careers. (Sharpe, 1999). The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine hosted Phil Arkow, the coordinator and co-founder of the National Link Coalition, to speak to students. Locally, a third-year veterinary student partnered with CHOICES, the primary service provider to victims of domestic violence in Central Ohio, to help facilitate temporary housing for pets that have been displaced due to domestic abuse. Reportedly, one of the reasons a domestic violence victim will not leave her home is that she fears for the pets left behind.

In addition to reinforcing the need for the first provision of the bill, the Texas church shooter also demonstrates the need for the second. Before murdering 27 members of First Baptist Church in rural Sutherland Springs, the Air Force court-martialed Devin Kelley based on charges of aggravated assault on his spouse and a child. Notably for purposes of our bill, he had also been charged with abusing his pet husky by pummeling it and jumping on top of it. For the animal abuse charges, he received a probationary sentence, paid fines and had the charges dismissed. His domestic violence and subsequent court-martial from the military highlights the need for the second portion of this abuse bill.

In addition to requiring mandatory reporting of animal abuse, HB 523 will require mandatory reporting of child abuse and domestic violence to the Family Advocacy Programs on military installations so that the military authorities as well as the civilian authorities are aware of the abuse situation. The Family Advocacy Programs are Department of Defense programs on military bases designed to prevent abuse within the military. While the DoD states that military members are less likely to be involved in domestic violence than their civilian counterparts, they recognize that abuse does occur. And in recognition of the harm done to the family, as well as the harm to military performance and to operational readiness base commanders realize that it is important for them to know when the abuse is happening so that they may help the families involved. By requiring a public children's service agency to report child abuse not only to civilian authorities but also to military authorities, and requiring peace officers to report the child abuse and domestic violence to military authorities, the Family Advocacy Program will have the necessary information to address the situation. The FAP stresses that an abuse report will not automatically ruin a service career, but they want to make sure the behavior stops and a treatment plan is followed.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that the proper reporting of both animal abuse and military child abuse and domestic violence will help us protect Ohio families and prevent so many of the tragedies that we read about in the paper that too often hit close to home.

Thank you for allowing me to testify on these portions of House Bill 523. I'll now turn it over to Representative Perales to discuss the changes to regulations to social worker boards, and then be happy to answer any questions.