



National Association of Social Workers

Testimony in support of HB 523- Regarding social workers and abuse reporting

Chair Ginter, Vice Chair LaTourette, and Ranking Member Boyd,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on this important bill.

My name is Colleen Dempsey, and I represent the profession of social work as the practice associate at the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Ohio Chapter. NASW Ohio represents around 26,000 social workers licensed in the state of Ohio. Social workers work in many settings from mental health to hospitals to child welfare. Strengthening relationships between child welfare and animal welfare systems is an important goal, and I am glad that this Committee is taking up the question today.

The link between animal abuse and child abuse is well-documented and compelling. History is in our favor, as the very first legal case of child abuse was only brought to light and handled through collaboration with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). This was in the 1870s when children were considered property and without protection from harm. From there, many systems of animal welfare began incorporating children's welfare into their sphere of services and concerns.

Animal abuse is woven into many of the complex social issues that social workers address every day. When it comes to intimate partner violence, abusers often hurt or threaten to hurt animals as a way of controlling their partners – and it works. Individuals wishing to leave abusive relationships are less likely to leave if they do not have a plan to ensure the safety of their pets. Furthermore, as we better understand the impacts of trauma on the developing brain, we learn that witnessing domestic violence between parents is one of the more likely and damaging forms of trauma that children experience. In cases of hoarding and neglect, the animal in question may be loved and valued, but by an individual whose mental health issues interfere with their abilities to provide proper care or who lack financial or other resources.

I would like to highlight the demonstrated need for this bill through one timely example. The same week that I received the call from Representative Lanese asking for input on this bill, I received a call from a social work intern who was completing her field placement in a hospital setting. This intern was supporting a hospital patient who was admitted to the hospital for longer than they intended to be there. The social work student had learned that the patient had a dog at home and was unwilling to plan for the dog's care. The student had been trying to work with this patient to develop a plan for the dog's care but was met with resistance. In my role supporting the social work intern, I found few options to guide her in taking steps to take care of the dog.

Social workers often find ourselves hearing horrific stories of abuse and neglect. The first tool in our toolbelt is always to work with the client toward a solution. Regardless of reporting requirements, we will always rely first^[DM1] on our clinical skills to motivate a client toward safer and healthier actions. In this example of the social work intern, they were eventually able to work with the patient to form a plan and take care of the dog. In cases where the social worker is unable to do this or when the abuse

has already occurred, the civil and criminal protections in this bill will give social workers more tools for protecting animals and people.

NASW Ohio is in full support of this bill, giving social workers protection and tools to cross report child and animal abuse. I am happy to take any questions.

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