



**COLLEGE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE
AND HUMAN SERVICE**

THE UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO

TESTIMONY ON OHIO H.B. 523

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Before the Ohio House Community and Family Advancement Committee

Tuesday May 15, 2018

Chairman Ginter, Vice-Chair LaTourette, Ranking Minority Member Boyd and distinguished members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee, I am Janet Hoy-Gerlach, Licensed Independent Social Worker with Supervisory Designation in Ohio and Associate Professor of Social Work with a Joint Appointment in Psychiatry at the University of Toledo. I am the lead author of *Human-Animal Interaction: A Social Work Guide*, a peer-reviewed book published in 2017 by the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Press. I have presented nationally and nationally on intersections between animal welfare and human welfare, served as an expert witness for the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division on the benefits of human-animal interaction, and have been appointed to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Interdisciplinary Service Animal Advisory Committee. I co-founded and co-chair the NASW Ohio Human Animal Interaction Workgroup, which addresses social work practice issues related to human-animal interaction and the human-animal bond. I developed and teach a social work elective course on connections between human and animal well-being, which includes content on the intersections between violence toward animals and violence toward people. I serve on the board of the Toledo Area Humane Society (TAHS), which does cruelty investigation for Lucas County; I have developed and supervise graduate social work internships at TAHS which focus on the intersections between human and animal welfare. My current funded research investigates benefits of the human-animal bond for adults living with mental illness who are at risk of isolation. Prior to going into academia, I worked in the non-profit and public mental health sectors with adults with severe mental illness in a variety of capacities, including: case management; street outreach; crisis intervention; counseling; and program development. I have two decades of social work practice experience in Ohio. I am very grateful to Representatives Lanese and Perales for their leadership on this critical legislation, and appreciate this opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 523; this bill, among numerous other important provisions, adds animal control and humane law enforcement officers to the list of professionals required to immediately report suspected child abuse; requires animal abuse reporting by veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and social workers, and social service and certain other professionals; and provides immunity from liability for those required to report.

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As a social worker, I have encountered violence toward animals through working with clients who have deliberately beaten or hurt animals, and, through working with clients who are themselves fleeing abusive relationships in which their companion animals are also targets of abuse. I have done lethality risk assessment on individuals whose deliberate infliction of suffering to animals – such as placing a kitten in a jar and enjoying watching the kitten suffocate – demonstrated risk to both vulnerable people and animals. The client I assessed who reported suffocating the kitten to me had small children and additional kittens in his household. The children were reportedly not present when the kitten was suffocated. I called the child protection intake hotline for guidance, and was told they were unable to open a case to assess for safety based on what might happen. Moreover, child abuse investigation units typically require substantive information before they open a case, including a complete address and information about the treatment of the children, which I did not have. In contrast, animal cruelty investigators may go out on a call with a general description of a locality and issue. Once on the premises, the animal cruelty investigators, in addition to assessing the well-being of the animal, offer on-site eyes and ears to assess other vulnerable humans; if there is a concern of human abuse, this can be reported to the appropriate human service provider. In my situation with the person who suffocated the kitten, however, I was legally not at liberty to contact the animal cruelty investigator due to confidentiality constraints.

As a licensed independent social worker, violating confidentiality to report animal abuse currently puts practitioners at risk of sanctions and other professional and possibly legal repercussions. While animal cruelty investigators would make a home visit to assess the kittens in the situation with the client who suffocated the kitten – and would subsequently likely be able to view the children in the home as well – calling the cruelty investigators in this situation involved putting my license to practice at risk. This is, quite simply, an unconscionable situation to put practitioners in. I wish I could say this was an isolated incident, but, I have throughout my career, particularly since focusing my research and service work on the relevance of human-animal interaction in social worker, been contacted on a regular basis by practitioners seeking guidance regarding what to do reporting-wise in instances of animal abuse. In the vast majority of situations I have been contacted about, there have also been humans at potential risk.

As summarized in my book *Human-Animal Interaction: A Social Work Guide* (2017): “All states in the United States have laws prohibiting animal cruelty; however, it is incumbent upon humans witnessing the cruelty to report it in order for such laws to be enforced. As social workers, we must consider both ethical and legal parameters involved in animal cruelty reporting; while we have an obligation to maintain confidentiality toward our human clients, we also have obligations to prevent harm to others, and to address social problems.... Animal cruelty has long been recognized as a social problem; child protection efforts emerged from animal protection efforts in the United States (Watkins, 1990), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (2016) has begun tracking incidents of animal cruelty alongside other ‘crimes against society’ such as arson, burglary, assault, and homicide.”

Enabling Ohio social workers and other human service professionals to report violence toward animals as both egregious unto itself and as a warning sign of other potential violence is crucial to a more

effective and unified community response against family violence; households with animals are in the majority in the United States. According to the most recent American Pet Products Manufacturer Survey – the largest national demographic survey of pet owners in the United States – over 68% of U.S. households report having at least one companion animal, and the majority of those households reported considering the animal(s) to be part of the family; the number of millennial households with animals is even higher. Elder abuse investigation, child abuse investigation, animal cruelty investigation, and domestic violence support services each operate under their own auspices and requirements in Ohio currently. In households where violence is occurring, abuses to both humans and animals may occur, yet identification and responses to these violent incidents can be hindered by fragmented reporting systems which view incidents of violence toward differing members of a household in isolation.

Cross-reporting requirements in Ohio will strengthen the social work profession's ability to respond to violence, as well as catalyze communication and collaboration between various violence investigation/protective systems, ultimately strengthening the safety net for all vulnerable parties, human and animal.

For the aforementioned reasons, I respectfully urge the House Community and Family Advancement Committee to pass H.B. 523; this is ground-breaking legislation that will improve outcomes for both humans and animals facing violence and abuse. Thank you for your consideration.

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