



Laura Lanese
State Representative, District 23
Sponsor Testimony for House Bill 33
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House Criminal Justice Committee

Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland, members of the Criminal Justice Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Substitute House Bill 33, which establishes cross-reporting for animal abuse in the State of Ohio.

The Boston Strangler, the Son of Sam killer, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Ted Bundy were serial killers. Luke Woodham, Kip Kinkel, and Nikolas Cruz were school shooters. The Texas church shooter, and the Westerville Ohio cop killer last year had histories of domestic violence. More surprisingly, all of these violent killers had a history of animal abuse. The link is not only tragic, but an opportunity to stop these violent offenders before they escalate their crimes.

The link between animal abuse and other forms of violence is well documented. In fact, one police officer I spoke with said this is how many violent offenders get their courage. Ted Bundy started by mutilating cats and dogs. Before opening fire on his classmates at Pearl High School in Mississippi, Luke Woodham spoke of the slaughtering of his pet dog Sparkle as his first kill. And, the Westerville police shooter had a warrant by the Capital Area Humane Society prohibiting him from owning companion animals before he turned on his partner and later shot and killed the two Westerville police officers.

In addition to these large-scale violent attacks, the link between animal abuse and the various forms of domestic violence from partner abuse to child abuse to elder abuse is also well documented. 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 a greater risk of becoming abusers themselves, as well as suffering through the trauma of watching their beloved pet harmed. Virginia researchers interviewed children whose mothers had used domestic violence services in the previous year. Of 242 children, one-quarter had seen someone threaten to or actually injure or kill a pet. You can imagine the trauma of a five year old watching his beloved puppy being thrown against the wall or beaten to death. Children at this age are particularly sensitive and are just developing ideas about fairness, and it is not hard to imagine

how this affects them and how it often leads to a violent cycle for them as they mature. Thus the child witness to the abuse, who may also have been the victim of the abuse, in turn becomes the abuser. This is one opportunity to stop the violence. Finally, we need to recognize the impact of the abuse on the family pet. This is an opportunity to save the companion animals in our state from future harm.

In 2015, the National Sheriff's Association lobbied the FBI to start a database of animal abusers precisely because they knew the link between animal abuse and other forms of violence was determinative of other violent outcomes and can often be helpful in investigating crimes against individuals. 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, domestic violence, 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 because it adds to their already long list of responsibilities. In fact, the reaction was quite the opposite. They were appreciative that they now had an opportunity to report animal abuse cases in homes where they often investigate child abuse or 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). Just recently, I was told about a veterinarian who had suspected animal abuse, but did not report it. Shortly thereafter, a child in the home died from abuse. The vet, so traumatized by this child's death, left her profession.

HB 33 mandates that veterinarians, social workers, and social service professionals report suspected animal abuse to law enforcement or their county humane society. The bill also requires law enforcement report suspected animal abuse to children's or adult protective services, when a child or elder is living in the home where the abuse is taking place.

These provisions will allow local officials to better identify homes with family violence, and provide law enforcement and social service professionals with the ability to intervene. For too many of our families, a cycle of abuse is left uninterrupted. Cross-reporting provides one mechanism to stop it.

With this legislation, Ohio will follow 19 other states (and the District of Columbia) in mandating reporting for veterinarians, social workers, children services caseworkers, and/or adult protective service professionals.

To protect those who report animal abuse, the bill provides civil immunity to those who make an animal abuse report in good faith.

Representative Carruthers and I have worked extensively with the interested parties in the bill to ensure that we are tailoring the bill to the desired outcome. The biggest change from HB 523 to

current substitute bill is that we decrease the penalties for those who fail to report. Under Substitute HB 33, failure to report results in a warning for the first offense and a small fine for subsequent offenses. Further, the substitute bill shifts the enforcement authority to the specific entity overseeing the mandatory reporter. For example, the enforcers for veterinarians and social workers are their respective licensing boards.

The changes in the substitute bill reflect months of work with the Ohio Veterinary Medical Association, the Public Children's Services Association of Ohio, the Cleveland Animal Protective League, and many other interested parties. With these changes, we expect to receive no opposition to Substitute HB 33.

The purpose of this bill is to create a standard of abuse reporting and to bring necessary attention to the importance of animal abuse. Our hope is to educate veterinarians, social workers, and others on how animal abuse affects families, and the significance that a report can have on the lives of so many people. A harsh penalty for failure to report, especially for a first offense, is not necessary to accomplish these goals.

Thank you Chairman Lang again for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 33.