



TESTIMONY ON OHIO H.B. 33

Presented by Vicki Deisner, Animal Welfare Institute
 Before the Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee
 Thursday, June 27, 2019

Chairman Lang, Vice-Chair Plummer, Ranking Minority Member Leland, and distinguished members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, I am Vicki Deisner, Government Affairs representative for the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI) in Ohio, and on behalf of AWI, the Animal Legal Defense Fund (ALDF), the Association of Prosecuting Attorneys (APA), the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), the National Animal Care and Control Association, The National LINK Coalition (the National Resource Center on The LINK Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence), Ohio Animal Advocates, Red Rover, and our thousands of collective members and constituents in Ohio, we ask that your committee support H.B. 33.

We would like to thank Representatives Lanese and Carruthers for their leadership on this critical legislation, which requires animal abuse reporting by veterinarians, dog wardens, and social service professionals. All of our organizations believe this is such a critical need that we all in one way or another provide resources to facilitate cross-reporting. For example, AWI just completed a series of regional training seminars in Cleveland, Columbus, and Toledo entitled **Cross-Reporting for Humane and Human Services: A Species Spanning Approach to Safer Families and Communities**. These seminars attracted over 150 professionals in social work, domestic violence, law enforcement, child and adult protective services and elder care, victim services, veterinary medicine, prosecutors, and humane officers to discuss the interrelationship between animal abuse and interpersonal violence and to forge partnerships for more effectively responding to these problems.

Cross-reporting, to put it quite simply, is a strategy that can improve the community's response to crimes against both people and animals and that may also help prevent future violence. The notion of cross-reporting presupposes that four types of family violence —domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and animal cruelty— rarely occur in a vacuum. They often overlap, and the commission of one of these crimes often is a “red flag” that other forms have occurred or will be coming next. For various reasons, animal cruelty, abuse, and neglect are often the sentinel warning signs, and the first “link” in the chain of family violence. When animal control or humane law enforcement officers are encouraged—or required—to contact family services

when they observe what they have been trained to recognize as signs of possible abuse of a child or older adult, a human life may also be saved. As an example, in 2010, Steven Sharp of Newport, OH, was sentenced to 17 months in prison for elder abuse. Law enforcement found his 81 year-old mother covered in filth, fleas, and lice, suffering from dementia, dehydration, and malnourishment. Over 50 diseased, malnourished dogs and cats had to be euthanized.

in Franklin County, KY, deputies arrested a woman accused of leaving her elderly mother on the floor covered in animal feces. A warrant was issued on charges of animal cruelty and neglect of an adult. This situation came to light because, while deputies were doing a welfare check on the animals at the home, they found the 75-year-old mother on the floor covered in filth. Four of the nine dogs in the house had to be euthanized.

Similarly, when social service professionals, in the course of a home visit necessitated by reports of child maltreatment, elder abuse, or domestic violence, are required to contact animal control/humane enforcement when there are signs of animal abuse, they may not only be saving an animal's life, they may also be helping prevent the escalation of violence in the household.

Requiring cross-reporting is not an answer is search of a problem; the relationship between animal cruelty and other forms of violence has been repeatedly affirmed in state and national studies. For example, a 2010 survey of state domestic violence programs by the Ohio Domestic Violence Network reported that more than 40 percent of respondents could recall cases where pets had been threatened with harm, actually harmed, or killed. A review of 53 New Jersey families referred to the state for physical assault of children found that pet abuse was present in 88 percent of those homes. In a national survey, 60 percent of participants who witnessed or engaged in animal cruelty also experienced either child maltreatment or domestic violence. In another study, 41 percent of men arrested for domestic violence had committed at least one act of animal cruelty since age 18. And perhaps most significantly, one of the four primary risk factors associated with men who become batterers is pet abuse. So there is a strong likelihood that animal control, humane law enforcement, and social service professionals are going to encounter problems about which they should be informing one another in an effort not only to address the violence that is happening at the time but also to reduce the likelihood of further violence.

Cross-reporting requirements have been the catalyst for collaborative relationships between local family violence programs and animal control/humane law enforcement personnel and for the creation of cross-training programs that enable each community to better recognize signs of abuse affecting one another's "constituents." This 360-degree awareness can result in better decisions for all victims. For example, every state refers to the "best interests of the child" in its laws on child custody decision-making by the court. While no state specifically lists the presence of animal cruelty among its "best interests of the child" factors, courts have actually taken animal abuse in the home into consideration when making decisions about child removal

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or termination of parental rights. Given that animal abuse is often committed in front of children—sometimes the abusers force the children to participate—in order to intimidate and control them, and given that the toxic stress of exposure to animal abuse can result in children becoming abusers themselves and in other emotional, cognitive, developmental, and behavioral problems leading to involvement with the criminal justice system, then this greater vigilance is more than warranted. Ohio was an early pioneer in this concept and for many decades the state’s humane societies were empowered to investigate child abuse as well as animal cruelty.

The inclusion of veterinarians among required reporters of animal abuse, as 17 states have already done, might not only result in saving animals’ lives but might also have the effect of uncovering other problems. For example, a young vet doing rounds encountered a severely injured cat. The owner told the vet about attempts to escape her boyfriend. When the vet told the owner of the animal that someone had tried to strangle her cat, the woman remarked that that had been done to her as well. Realizing what was going on, the vet contacted the local humane society who advised her to hold the cat as evidence and then she spent hours listening to the owner’s story of the abuse she and her pets had endured. With her cat receiving care, she was finally willing to press charges, and the boyfriend was sentenced to nearly six years in prison.

The American Veterinary Medical Association has expressed its support for such reporting; its [policy](#) is as follows:

“The AVMA recognizes that veterinarians may observe cases of animal abuse or neglect as defined by federal or state laws, or local ordinances. The AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report such cases to appropriate authorities, whether or not reporting is mandated by law. Prompt disclosure of abuse is necessary to protect the health and welfare of animals and people. Veterinarians should be aware that accurate, timely record keeping and documentation of these cases are essential. The AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to educate clients regarding humane care and treatment of animals.”

The American Animal Hospital Association likewise endorses this concept. AAHA’s Position Statement on Reporting Animal Abuse reads as follows:

“The American Animal Hospital Association supports the reporting of suspicions of animal abuse to the appropriate authorities. The Association encourages the adoption of laws mandating veterinary professionals to report suspicions of animal abuse and providing immunity from legal liability when filing such reports in good faith. Veterinary professionals should be familiar with animal cruelty laws and their veterinary practice act, including any mandatory reporting requirements.

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“Studies have shown there is a link between animal abuse and other forms of violence, including child, spousal, and elder abuse. Reporting suspicions of animal abuse is important as it will trigger an investigation that may ultimately protect both animals and humans. It upholds the veterinary oath to prevent animal suffering and promote public health.”

Attached to this testimony are posters AWI created to make veterinarians and others aware of possible signs of animal abuse and to encourage the reporting of such cases to the proper authorities. As evidenced by the workshops described above and other efforts, our groups recognize that cross reporting must go hand-in-hand with cross training, and we stand ready to assist the various professions involved in this initiative with training.

For the aforementioned reasons, ALDF, APA, AWI, HSUS, NACA, The National Link Coalition, OAA, and Red Rover respectfully urge the House Criminal Justice Committee to pass H.B. 33, which will create another valuable addition to Ohio’s laws that are making life better for the human and animal victims of violence. Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.

Vicki Deisner, Esq.
Animal Welfare Institute
Government Affairs, Ohio
vicki.deisner@gmail.com
614/493-8383