



Laura Lanese
State Representative, District 23
Sponsor Testimony for Sub. House Bill 33
July 21, 2020
Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee

Chairman Hoagland, Vice Chair Schaffer, Ranking Member O'Brien, and members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee:
Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Substitute House Bill 33, which establishes cross-reporting for animal abuse, child abuse, and other forms of abuse in the home.

The goal of this bill is to protect three groups of possible victims of violence: companion animals, vulnerable family members in the home, and the community at large through the mandatory cross-reporting of animal abuse by veterinarians and social service professionals, as well as the mandatory child abuse reporting by county dog wardens and other animal protective professionals. These individuals often see the first signs of abuse, and we hope can stop the abuse before it escalates.

This bill will first and foremost protect the companion animals within the home, most often dogs and cats who are abused by their owners. As our society becomes more attached to our pets, we look to more humane legislation. We have seen numerous animal protection bills over the past few years, including most recently SB 205. In Nov. 2019, President Trump signed into law the Preventing Animal Cruelty Act. While we don't have statistics on the number of animal abuse cases in the state, we know within central Ohio, Columbus Humane responds to more than 6,000 calls a year to investigate possible abuse cases.

The second group this bill will protect will be possible victims of violence within the home: children, domestic partners, and the elderly.

The LINK between animal abuse and other forms of violence has been talked about for centuries. We can go back to philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant, and John Locke, among others, who have written about the link between animal abuse and other forms of violence. Locke, for example, wrote in the 1600s of his concerns about children “...tormenting and killing...beasts, (who) will, by degrees, harden their minds even towards men; and they who delight in the suffering and destruction of inferior creatures, will not be apt to be very compassionate or benign to those of their own kind.”

Those in law enforcement have long been aware of the link between animal abuse and other forms of violence, and in 2015 the National Sheriffs Association lobbied the FBI to create a database to track animal abusers because of their first-hand knowledge of the importance of animal abuse as a gateway crime to other forms of violence. So, while we may care deeply about protecting the dogs and cats in our homes, we also know that we may be able to prevent other forms of violence if we can catch perpetrator before they have an opportunity escalate their violence.

We also know that when a domestic partner is abused within a home, the child living within the home is much more likely to be abused as well. The same is true with animal abuse. For example, a study found that animal abuse occurred in 88% of families that were under state supervision for the physical abuse of their children. Virginia researchers interviewed children whose mothers had used domestic violence services in the previous year. Of more than two hundred and fifty children questioned, one-quarter had seen someone threaten or harm the family pet. We also know that one tactic used by abusers is to coerce children into silence by abusing the family pet. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon with the sexual abuse of children. Threatened with violence against their beloved pet, children who are sexually abused will keep silent to the abuse to keep their pet safe. Finally, we also know that children can be the abusers of the family pet and the sooner they are caught the sooner they can get help. Without help they have higher rates of sexual violence against their peers, as well as future rates of violence against others. If we have the opportunity to stop this cycle of violence, we should grab it with both hands and run with it.

In addition to child abuse, we know that animal abusers are also more likely to abuse domestic partners. There have been several studies on this link. One study found that women living in domestic violence shelters were 11 times more likely to report that their partners had hurt or killed their pets than a similar cohort of

women. Women who are abused are often reluctant to leave the family home without their pet for fear of harm to the pet. This can have devastating consequences, which is why many domestic violence shelters are now allowing room for the family pet.

In addition to the family violence against children and partners, we know that the link between animal abuse and elder abuse is also strong. Nearly one third of adult protective service caseworkers reported that their clients' pets have been threatened, harmed or killed. Approximately 45% of these social workers have witnessed the harm when they have visited the home. One tactic used by abusers is to threaten the elder's pet in order to gain access to the senior's bank accounts. Completely attached to their pet, these seniors often acquiesce to save their pet from harm.

The last form of violence, community violence, also has a strong link to animal abuse. In particular serial killers, school shooters, and mass shooters usually start with abusing animals first.

No clearer is this link seen than in the likes of some of America's worst of the worst. The Boston Strangler, Son of Sam, Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy all got their start with abusing animals. The same is true of the school shooters Luke Woodham, Kip Kinkel, and Nicholas Cruz. And it is true with other notorious criminals like the Texas church shooter, and closer to home, the Westerville cop killer who both had run-ins with the law over animal abuse and neglect. The sooner we stop their violence towards animals, the greater likelihood of preventing greater harm to society.

So how do we do prevent the escalation of violence? HB 33 mandates that veterinarians, social workers, and other social service professionals, such as marriage therapists, must report suspected animal abuse to law enforcement or to their county humane society. The bill also requires law enforcement to report suspected animal abuse to children's services or adult protective services, when a child or elder is living in the home where the abuse is taking place. Finally, the bill adds a dog warden, deputy dog warden, or other person appointed to act as an animal control officer to the list of professionals who must immediately report child abuse (when acting in an official or professional capacity). These individuals must report the abuse to the public children services agency (PCSA) or municipal

or county peace offers. This is currently true of county humane agents, and as we sadly know people are more likely to report animal abuse than they are child abuse. When I first started working on this bill in 2017, I spoke to the social worker's association, I worried that they might be opponents 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 were often investigating child abuse or other forms of abuse. Currently, they are reluctant to report animal abuse out of fear that they may violate privacy laws and feel like their hands are unnecessarily tied.

I have also spoken with several veterinarians who told me that when they suspect animal abuse, they already report to local humane agents in order to protect not only the animal but also others in the home despite the potential negative consequences. 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). During my research, I was told about a veterinarian who had suspected animal abuse of the pet she was examining but did not report it. Shortly thereafter, a two-year old in the home died from abuse. The vet, so traumatized by this child's death, left her profession.

The goal of this bill is not to be punitive, but to help educate the mandatory reporters of violence. If they report in good faith, they will be immune from civil or criminal penalties. If they fail to report, the first violation will result in a warning. Further violations will be handled according to their licensing agency or oversight authority. However, if they knowingly make a false report it is a fourth-degree misdemeanor. During the first iteration of this bill, I worked very closely with the interested parties, the Ohio Veterinary Medical Association, the Public Children's Services Association of Ohio, the Cleveland Animal Protective League, and many others to make this bill as non-punitive, but pro-educative as possible. The bill was passed out of the House by a vote of 90-2.

Thank you Chair Hoagland again for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 33. I'm happy to answer any questions.