



August 31, 2020

Re. Proponent Testimony for House Bill 33 to establish animal abuse reporting requirements

Chair Hoagland, Vice Chair Schaffer, Ranking Member O'Brien and members of the committee,

My name is Colleen Dempsey and I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 33. I apologize that I am unable to present in person, and I have included my contact information below for questions you might have. I represent the profession of social work through my position as Practice Associate with the Ohio Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. NASW Ohio represents nearly 30,000 licensed social workers in the state. Our members work primarily in the field of behavioral health and can also be found embedded in schools, working with older adults, within child and adult welfare, and on.

The link between animal abuse and child abuse is well-documented and compelling and the systems to investigate them share similar roots. 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 Animal (ASPCA). This was in the 1870s when children were still considered property and without the legal protections from harm that we promote today. From that time, many systems of animal welfare began incorporating children's welfare into their sphere of services and concerns.

NASW Ohio has supported this legislation from the beginning primarily for the immunity from civil and criminal liability when making a report in good faith. Social workers utilize systemic, strengths-based frameworks to understand an individual's behaviors. We understand that abuse and neglect behaviors are often rooted in desperation and unmet needs. Social workers will continue to support clients and communities in addressing those underlying contributors to abuse and neglect through behavioral health supports, connection to social safety net benefits and other resources. Social workers know well that despite our best proactive efforts, filing a report of abuse or neglect is sometimes necessary to establish the immediate safety of a vulnerable person or animal. Sometimes is the reporting that connects a family to much needed services and resources. While the immunity provided by this bill expands the options available

to a social worker who observes or suspects animal abuse, our members will continue to be conscientious that breaching the privacy rights of a client is a serious event that should be handled with care.

Addressing animal abuse and neglect is already a part of social work practice. When working with survivors of intimate partner violence, social workers understand and account for the fact that abusers often hurt or threaten to hurt animals as a way of controlling their partners. This tactic of manipulation works, as individuals wishing to leave abusive relationships are less likely to leave if they don't have a plan to ensure the safety of their pets. 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. Strengthening relationships between child welfare and animal welfare systems is an important goal of this legislation.

Social workers work both with survivors and perpetrators of abuse and neglect. Regardless of how our reporting requirements, our most important set of tools will continue to be resources and clinical interventions that can support a client in taking safer and healthier actions. Passage of House Bill 33 gives social workers more tools to intervene when an animal may be experiencing abuse. Having more cross-system engagement should bring more safety to all – children, survivors of domestic abuse, animals and communities. We hope you will support the passage of this bill and again I am available to answer questions via email or phone.

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