



**COLLEGE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE
AND HUMAN SERVICE**

THE UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO

To: Members of the Ohio Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee

Testimony on: **Sub. H.B. No. 33** Establish animal abuse reporting requirements

From:

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Chairman Hoagland and distinguished Members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, my colleague Dr. Aviva Vincent and I thank you for your consideration of our joint testimony in support of Sub. H.B. No. 33. We are both nationally regarded experts in the area of human-animal interaction, as well as social work practitioners and faculty members. I have also practiced extensively in the public and non-profit mental health systems; too many times I have encountered situations in which I become aware of animal cruelty and am precluded by confidentiality from reporting the perpetrator. The passage of this bill will untie the hands of social workers and other professionals in terms of being able to effectively respond to cruelty toward animals in a way that will better protect *both* people and animals.

I shall begin by sharing a bit about our credentials. I am Janet Hoy-Gerlach, a Licensed Independent Social Worker with Supervisory Designation in Ohio and Associate Professor of Social Work 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. NASW is the largest professional social work organization in the United States. I have presented nationally and internationally 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. Along with Dr. Vincent and in collaboration with the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Ohio Chapter, I co-founded and co-chair the NASW Ohio Human Animal Interaction Workgroup; this committee 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 served on the board of the Toledo Humane Society (THS) for over a decade, which does cruelty investigation for Lucas County. I have developed and supervise graduate social work internships at THS which focus on the intersections between human and animal welfare. My current funded research, in collaboration with ProMedica

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Healthcare System and THS, investigates benefits of the human-animal bond for adults living with severe mental illness who are at risk of isolation. Prior to going into academia, I worked in the clinically non-profit and public mental health sectors with adults with severe mental illness in a variety of capacities. I have over two decades of social work practice experience in Ohio.

My colleague Dr. Aviva Vincent is a certified veterinary social worker. She developed and teaches a veterinary social work course at the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel School of Social Work Case Western Reserve University; this is one of the top ten schools of social work in the United States. Dr. Vincent also teaches coursework for the University of Tennessee Veterinary Social Work program. Dr. Vincent is the Director of Research at Fieldstone Therapeutic Riding Center, as well as a PATH international certified riding instruction with extensive experience providing such services. Dr. Vincent has published on the link between violence toward animals and violence toward people, and has presented and researched extensively on this topic. She is a collaborator and member of the Center for Human-Animal Interactions Research and Education (CHAIRE) at The Ohio State University, and is leading international efforts for veterinary social workers to organize into a professional entity to share knowledge and resources. Her ground-breaking research on therapy dogs in pediatric dentistry practice examined biomarker changes in children with dental fear when they were able to interact with therapy dogs. Dr. Vincent also owns a consulting business on human-animal interaction issues and consults nationally on this topic.

We are grateful for your consideration of Sub. H.B. 33; 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 social workers, and social service and certain other professionals; and provides immunity from liability for those required to report. This immunity component is particularly important; without it, social workers and other helping professionals are put in an untenable position in which they must risk sanctions for breaking client confidentiality in order to report even the most heinous of animal abuse.

I will provide an example of such; although highly disturbing, it well illustrates the need for this bill. As a clinical social worker in a mental health setting, 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 who deliberately cause suffering to animals. One individual reported placing a tiny kitten in a jar, screwing the lid on tightly, and enjoying watching the kitten cry and slowly suffocate to death. The person who disclosed this to me had both small children and additional kittens in his household and posed a risk to both. 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. If the immunity provision was in place, I would have been able to report the person who suffocated the kitten; however, I was legally not at liberty to contact the animal cruelty investigator due to confidentiality constraints.

To reiterate, 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; unfortunately, throughout my career from early on until the present – particularly since focusing my research and service work on the relevance of human-animal interaction in social worker – I have 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. Dr. Vincent has experienced similar contacts and issues.

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.”

As stated in a 2019 peer-reviewed journal article by Dr. Vincent and colleagues on the link between violence toward animals and violence toward people: “In practice, cross-reporting of suspected abuse or neglect is a vital mechanism for connecting human and animal professionals to address the issues between human and animal welfare systems. This sharing of information can increase the likelihood that clients... will receive comprehensive services that can improve their level of safety and quality of life. By providing professionals with education for indicators of abuse, and strategies for how to make a report, communities can build stronger support networks for those in need.”

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 all of the aforementioned reasons, we respectfully urge the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee to pass Sub. H.B. 33; this is ground-breaking legislation will improve outcomes for both humans and animals facing violence and abuse. Thank you for your consideration.

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