



Statement of
Jo-Anne Basile, Executive Director
Connecticut Votes for Animals
Support of SB 923 with Changes
Before the
Judiciary Committee
March 11, 2021

Co-Chairs Senator Winfield and Representative Stafstrom, Vice Chairs, Ranking Members and Honorable Members of the Judiciary Committee.

CT Votes for Animals (CVA) is a grass roots animal advocacy organization representing over 5,000 residents across the State of Connecticut. CVA members care deeply that Connecticut provides a safe and humane environment for all its animals. CVA speaks up for animals as a reminder to the public that a compassionate world is good for all and one in which we should all want to live.

CVA thanks the Committee for raising SB 923 and providing the opportunity for a discussion on this oftentimes underestimated but important section of the law.

CVA supports the concept in SB 923 but only with the language, offered by Representative Borer, incorporated into the final bill.

Several years ago, CT moved to the forefront of progressive jurisprudence with passage of Desmond's Law (PA16-30). Agreement to bring expertise in animal cruelty into the court room to further the interest of justice was revolutionary. CT's enactment of Desmond's Law started a movement. Today, multiple states, including New York, California, New Jersey and Illinois, are legislating similar initiatives and the State of Maine enacted its own version last summer. CVA commends the Committee once again for having the foresight to move the ball forward.

Unfortunately, CT has been less than "revolutionary" when it comes to its animal cruelty statutes. The statutes have not been reviewed in over 30 years, they have been added to periodically often creating redundant and some inadequate terminology that makes interpretations confusing and difficult to administer by law enforcement.

The beauty of the Committee's raised concept SB 923 is that it has the potential to allow experts to step back and look at the issue in its totality. This is something CVA believes is needed if CT is to move its animal cruelty laws into the 21st Century.

CVA believes to do this well requires any study to be guided by experts in the field. Those who have both academic and first-hand experience in the practice and

application of animal law. Looking at trends nationwide, learning from the mistakes as well as positive outcomes from laws in other states becomes an invaluable lesson in any review.

Why is it important to take a review of the state's animal cruelty statutes? A simple answer is that the current statutes are overlapping, at times contradictory, lack adequate terminology, and just need a good update. Like any other aspect of the law it's good practice to keep up with current thinking and trends in the field. Hopefully, a statutory review results in a fairer outcome for animals when the law gives clear direction to those who carry it out. An equally important reason for this review is to better understand the link between animal cruelty and future violent crimes against people, particularly the vulnerable. As we tackle improving the law regarding cruelty to animals we begin to tackle the foundational causes of other criminal action. According to the National Link Coalitionⁱ "Animal maltreatment is often "the tip of the iceberg" and the first warning sign of an individual or family in trouble."

For many, animal cruelty is viewed as a simple misdemeanor, not an indication of a perpetrator's likelihood to commit other, oftentimes violent, crimes. But research in the past 20+ years clearly shows that taking a more serious look at these crimes is critical to address aggressive behavior towards humans.ⁱⁱ

- In 2001, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reviewed the existing research and determined that nearly two-thirds of inmates who commit crimes of aggression might also abuse animals.
- A 2010 Chicago Police Department study "revealed a startling propensity for offenders charged with crimes against animals to commit other violent offenses toward human victims." A 2007 survey of women in domestic-violence shelters indicated that 71 percent had partners who abused or threatened to abuse pets.
- In January 2015, the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System elevated animal cruelty to its own category in the system, to be tracked alongside crimes such as homicide and arson.

The statement from the National Link Coalition perhaps sums up best why animal cruelty should be taken seriously in the justice community: "***When animals are abused, people are at risk; when people are abused, animals are at risk.*** Increasing awareness of the link is encouraging legislators, community agencies, and caring people to take action by giving greater importance to suspected animal abuse, knowing that they may be also preventing other forms of violence."

CVA believes the Sentencing Commission can be a helpful partner to study CT's animal cruelty statutes. However, for this study to be viable it must reach out to experts and those with direct experience in animal law and animal cruelty. We believe these experts are key to an outcome that reflects real world experience coupled with an intellectually rigorous viewpoint of future trends and outcomes.

In a related matter, CVA would like to endorse HB 5193, AN ACT INCREASING THE PENALTY FOR ENGAGING IN SEXUAL CONTACT WITH AN ANIMAL. There have been a few cases in the recent past that fall under this category. We will not delineate any of the horrific examples of cases charged in CT, except to say amending this statute deserves serious attention by the Committee. While the HB 5193 calls for increased penalties, current law also suffers from an inconsistency that can be easily fixed. Last year a defendant was charged with this crime but in the end the Judge was forced to drop the charges because of a technical inconsistency in the statute's definition of sexual contact. CVA believes there is an easy fix and would recommend that Committee add this technical fix to the purpose of HB 5193 and move both forward this year.

Once again CVA wants to thank the Committee for raising SB 923 and providing a platform for discussion. We believe a review of CT's animal cruelty statutes by the Sentencing Commission with input from experts and practitioners in animal law and animal cruelty is a progressive undertaking. CVA strongly encourages the Committee to adopt the language provided by Representative Borer to achieve a more effective review and policy recommendations that will encourage fair and greater protections for animals.

Thank you,

Jo-Anne Basile, Executive Director

info@ctvotesforanimals.org
202-309-3730

ⁱ The National Link Coalition, Phil Arkow Coordinator, www.nationallinkcoalition.org

ⁱⁱ *The Atlantic*, STEFANIE MARSH, The Link Between Animal Abuse and Murder, AUGUST 31, 2017