

February 23, 2010
In support of HB No. 5041

I want to thank the Chairs and the Select Committee on Children for this opportunity to support HB 5041, an act concerning cross-reporting of animal abuse and child abuse and share the importance of considering a cross-reporting bill for the children and animals of Connecticut. My name is Kate Nicoll – and I am a clinical social worker and founder of nonprofit, Soul Friends, Inc. established in 2003 to promote the healing benefits of the human animal bond for children living with loss, illness, trauma and socio-emotional challenges.

Soul Friends, Inc is one of handful of centers across the country trained by the Animals and Society Institute of Washington, DC to provide specialized assessment and care to children and teens that have both witnessed and/or abused animals. This treatment modality, called Anicare, is a 10-12 session specialized psychotherapy program that integrates cognitive-behavioral theory, trauma informed practices and a specialized knowledge of the human- animal bond to help improve empathic responses and increase impulse control in youth. In research studies, in homes with domestic violence, the co-occurrence rate has been from 25% to 80% between child abuse and animal abuse. The concern for Connecticut children is that we have not been accurately screening those impacted by the link of animal abuse and domestic violence. We have not asked for cross-reporting procedures between child care agencies and animal welfare agencies which would improve service. Consideration of a cross-reporting bill could greatly improve the well-being of children and animals at risk for abuse and neglect.

Soul Friends has offered its expertise to the state Department of Children and Families in both formal and informal ways to increase their understanding of “the link” between domestic violence, animal abuse and child abuse.. Sadly, our nationally supported research effort to study the Anicare model was rejected by the DCF Internal Review Board for one identified concern that there were not enough cases. However, to share some good news, Soul Friends programs have been recognized informally by several area DCF offices for our specialized in treating children who have often failed traditional therapy, as well as those youth who have abused animals.

As encouraged by Results Based Accountability, we seem to have missed an opportunity to provide a low cost- high impact program to children suffering with the effects of domestic violence and animal abuse. The

benefits of instituting a cross-reporting bill is that it would begin to gather our own state's co-occurrence rates answering the "how many" question of RBA with the overall goal to improve the well-being and safety of children and animals impacted by domestic violence.

Our state is in a unique position to have multiple agencies with specialized knowledge, such as the Anicare program and Our Companions CT Safe Pet program for providing respite to animals in crisis - are ready willing and waiting to respond to the establishment of a cross-reporting bill. In recent legislative testimonies, DCF has also been open to incorporating a few suggested questions on home evaluations that would address the welfare and well-being of animals. The benefits of formalizing a cross-reporting initiative are that it would ensure that agencies would honor their duty to safeguard both children and animals identified at risk for abuse. As well, it would assure that the agencies involved are able to identify and define what constitutes neglect and/or abuse in both populations by agreeing on definitions and terminology. Allowing things to continue informally ensures that hundreds of animals and children often fall through the cracks – and will suffer at the hands of their abuser. Connecticut could put itself in a position to follow on the successes of West Virginia, Illinois, Colorado, California, Ohio and Virginia and clearly constitute the importance confidentiality and consent to share information among disciplines by instituting a cross-reporting bill to protect both children and animals.

A cross-reporting bill would change our response to the phone call to our office from a DCF worker asking what to do with a teenage boy, a witness to domestic violence, who had put a family dog in the microwave and turned it on for a few seconds. The animal did not die, but remained in the home – even after our strong suggestions to re-home the dog. The answer to this call is a cross-reporting bill – the animal's welfare would have been safeguarded and the young man could have received specialized services and decrease the likelihood for future abuse and violence.

Respectfully submitted,
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