

# Center for Youth Leadership

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Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

## Connecticut Assembly's Select Committee on Children Testimony in Support of HB 6226

February 3, 2011

### Introduction

Good afternoon Representative Urban, Senator Musto, Representative Fawcett and members of the committee. We have a special greeting for Representative Terrie Wood, who is from our district, and who has worked with us on legislation about teen dating violence.

My name is Emily Todd and I am a member of the Center for Youth Leadership, which is based at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk. Joining me is Lexi Brown, who is also a member of the Center.

On behalf of the 226 student activists at the Center for Youth Leadership, we are here to testify in support of HB 6226 - *An Act Concerning Cross-Reporting of Child Abuse and Animal Cruelty* - and its companion bills about humane education in schools, an animal abuser registry and counseling for children who have been convicted of animal cruelty.

### HB 6226: Act Concerning Cross-Reporting of Child Abuse & Animal Cruelty

Child abuse prevention has been the focus of our public awareness and social change campaigns since 1999. The fact that the link between animal cruelty and child abuse is just the fourth subtopic added to our campaign in 11 years points to its importance.

We were compelled to adopt the link between these issues for several reasons:

1. *The overwhelming evidence that the link between animal cruelty and child abuse is real* A correlation between animal abuse, family violence and other forms of community violence has been established for some time. Of the scores of studies we reviewed about the link, two stood out. Northeastern University and the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals looked at animal abuse cases over a 21-year period. They found that a person who had committed animal abuse was five times more likely to commit violence against people than those who had not abused animals. The second study assessed the exposure to violence of nearly 1,000 college students. It found that 62 percent of the students who witnessed or committed animal cruelty as a child had also experienced child abuse or domestic violence.
2. *Children and animal cruelty* According to the Humane Society of the United States, 20 to 31 percent of the intentional animal cruelty cases every year are committed by people my age. The stories and

statistics are no better closer to home. We were horrified by the countless stories we heard from classmates who use pellet guns to shoot small animals. And according to the animal control officer in Bridgeport, of the approximately 550 animal cruelty cases his office investigates every year, half are committed by teens 13-16 years of age.

3. *The importance of cross-reporting* According to studies conducted by the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work, cross reporting has helped foster early intervention in cases with children. "In several recent cases," said Professor Frank Ascione, "children hinted at animal abuse to teachers who alerted animal protection agencies. Those workers spotted warning signs of other types of abuse, so child welfare workers were called in. The caseworkers found that the children themselves were being abused."

While these studies are important to our cause, nothing compares to our personal experiences. Twice a week for the past seven years our members have volunteered at two safe houses in Fairfield County for children who have been abused. We cannot begin to tell you how many times we have heard 5-6-7 year-old children talk about how their abusive parent kicks, punches, and slaps the family pet just as he kicks, punches, and slaps mommy; or the number of drawings we've seen that show a child hurting an animal because "...it seems like fun" or because "...I saw my daddy do it;" or the number of times we are playing with the children to find one or two of them demonstrating some sort of violent behavior towards an imaginary animal.

Based on testimony last year about a similar bill and what we've been reading lately, we realize there is opposition to HB 6226. We know that the Department of Children and Families expressed concern about training cost and other resources, as did the Department of Agriculture, the Connecticut Municipal Animal Control Officers Association and the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association. The Department of Children and Families also expressed concern about families' confidentiality.

Although we support HB 6226, we have questions about how it will be implemented. Here are the issues we'd like you to consider, if you have not already done so.

1. Will DCF caseworkers and animal control officers ask about animal cruelty and child abuse as a matter of routine, or will it be based on a casual visual observation only. For example, will DCF caseworkers add a screen for animal cruelty to the screens it uses to assess domestic violence, substance abuse and other issues when investigating a case? Will the software that DCF uses have to be revised to accommodate caseworkers' notes about animal cruelty?

2. According to the bill, if a DCF caseworker notes animal cruelty during a home visit, he/she will need to report it. Let's say the caseworker also suspects child abuse in the family. How will the caseworker report the suspected animal cruelty without compromising the family's identity?

3. Has anyone assessed how HB 6226 will affect the training and work of animal control officers and caseworkers? For example, who will design and pay for the training that animal control officers and caseworkers will need to complete? We have one answer for you. Ask the Connecticut Humane Society to invest some of its endowment in a training course, and have its staff lead the training.

And finally, let's say HB 6226 becomes law. Who will design and implement an evaluation to see how the law is working three-six-nine months after it is enacted?

Emily mentioned our work in safe houses with children who have been abused. Those personal experiences help fuel our passion for this issue, and they are an indication that the time is now to pass this

legislation. Here's another indication, this one from scores of people like you and me, people who stop at our countless street corner demonstrations to voice support for the protection of children and pets; people who want you, the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Agriculture to work together; to demonstrate some political will; and to pass this legislation.

Thanks for listening. We would be happy to answer any questions.

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