

# Center for Youth Leadership

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## **Connecticut Legislature: Committee on Children**

*Testimony in Support of HB 5039: An Act Concerning Animal-Assisted Services; HB 5037: An Act Concerning Cross Reporting of Child Abuse and Animal Cruelty; and HB 5040: An Act Concerning the Department of Children and Families and the Protection of Children*

*February 18, 2014*

### ***Millie Cunningham and Andrea Barros***

Hi Senator Bartolomeo and members of the committee. We have special greetings for Representative Urban, with whom we have worked in the past, and Senator Duff and Representative Wood, both of whom represent our hometown of Norwalk and support our activism on a host of issues. My name is Millie Cunningham and this is Andrea Barros. We are members of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk. On behalf of our 226 members, we are here to testify about *HB 5037, HB 5039 and HB 5040.*

### ***HB 5039***

We will start with HB 5039. Twice a week since 2003 we have volunteered with children who have been abused and/or experienced violence at home. We can say without hesitation that animal assisted therapy has been a godsend for many of these children.

Since we are not trained therapists, we do not lead the animals in their sessions with the children. However, when we sit with the children or hold them as they play and read to the animals, you can actually feel the children's bodies relax; their hearts stop racing; their breathing slows to a comfortable pace; and they talk to the animals as you or I would to a trusted friend or family member. The responses of

the children are more than fleeting. They talk about the animals for days and weeks after each visit, which reinforces the positive feelings of nonjudgmental acceptance and unconditional love, both of which are in short supply in the children's lives.

There is a significant body of research to support these and other claims, including those that result from animal intervention after traumatic incidents like the Sandy Hook school shooting and the attacks of 9/11. We have included the resources in our written testimony, but we want to mention two: *The Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy* by Dr. Aubrey Fine. Dr. Fine is recognized by many as a leading expert in animal assisted therapy. The other book is *Animal-Assisted Therapy: A Research Resource Guide*, by Phil Arkow, the chairperson of the Latham Foundation's Child and Animal Abuse Prevention Project.

Both books address the use of therapy animals to facilitate treatment, especially treatment of children with emotional, social and even physical problems. Dr. Fine devotes a chapter to the design, implementation and evaluation of animal-assisted therapy programs in health and mental health organizations. The chapter outlines a "...series of concerns that must be addressed by effective programs, including organizational, staff and client issues." For the Department of Children and Families, per HB 5039, that means the selection of the animal assisted therapy organization; the training of DCF staff in animal assisted therapy; and how DCF and the animal assisted therapy organization will work together.

Finally, we note that money is not attached to HB 5039. If you have not already done so, we suggest you review legislation that is under consideration by the New Jersey General Assembly. You will find a copy in our written testimony. The bill establishes a pilot program in the state's child welfare agency to provide animal assisted therapy to victims of childhood violence or trauma. It appropriates \$100,000 from the state's general fund to implement the provisions of the bill. Funding with HB 5029 would help with training expenses; a review of best practices in similar programs; and the design and evaluation of an animal assisted therapy program in Connecticut.

## **HB 5037**

As far as HB 5037 is concerned, we had the honor of working with Representative Urban and others on the cross-reporting bill that became law a couple of years ago. We favor the changes made to the law, especially the requirement in "Section 3, subsection a" that DCF employees make a written report to the Commissioner of Agriculture about suspected cases of animal cruelty.

However, we kindly ask that you review two sections of the bill. In "Section 1, subsection c," given the link between animal cruelty and harm to people, we question why it takes a monthly report from the Department of Agriculture to prompt DCF to research its database of open cases. We suggest you shorten the reporting time between the two departments. In addition, in Section 4 of the bill, we suggest that the annual report made to the Children's Committee include the number of written reports received by animal control officers and caseworkers and the outcomes of the cases reported.

## **HB 5040**

Finally, we kindly ask that you look at a couple of sections in HB 5040. Given the public awareness work we do about human trafficking, we very much support the addition of children and teens who have been identified as victims of human trafficking in "Section 4, subsection a" and "Section 5, subdivision 8."

As far as mandated reporters are concerned, we ask that item 35 in "Section 6, subsection B" read, "Any paid director and assistant director of a private or public youth camp." Given that this is a short legislative session, we have decided to wait until next year to reintroduce our request that every employee of camps that are licensed by the Department of Public Health pass an annual national criminal background check.

Thanks for the opportunity to testify.

**Notes:**

Arkow, Phil, *Animal-Assisted Therapy: A Research Resource Guide*, Latham Foundation's Child and Animal Abuse Prevention Project.

Brody, Jane. "Easing the Way in Therapy With the Aid of An Animal," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2011.

Delta Society. (2009b). *Animal-assisted therapy (AAT)*. Retrieved January 14, 2011.

Fine, A. H. (Ed.). (2010). *Animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice (3rd edition ed.)*. San Diego: Academic Press.

Governing Magazine, "Connecticut May Be First State to Codify Animal-Assisted Therapy for Trauma Victims," July 26, 2013

Johnson, R. A., Odendaal, J. S., & Meadows, R. L. (2002). *Animal-assisted interventions research: Issues and answers*. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 24(4), 422-440.

Kaminski, M., Pellino, T., & Wish, J. (2002). *Play and pets: The physical and emotional impact of child-life and pet therapy on hospitalized children*. *Children's Health Care*, 31(4), 321-335.

New Jersey General Assembly, 215th Legislature: "Bill A2155: Establishes pilot program in DCF providing animal assisted therapy to victims of childhood violence, trauma or children with behavioral health care needs," Assemblywoman Celeste Riley, January 16, 2004

Palley, L. S., O'Rourke, P. P., & Niemi, S. M. (2010). *Mainstreaming animal-assisted therapy*. *ILAR Journal/National Research Council, Institute of Laboratory Animal Resources*, 51(3), 199-207.

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## **STATE OF NEW JERSEY**

### ***215th LEGISLATURE***

*A2155: Establishes a pilot program in DCF providing animal assisted therapy to victims of childhood violence, trauma or children with behavioral health care needs; appropriates \$100,000*

*INTRODUCED JANUARY 16, 2014*

*Sponsored by: Assemblywoman CELESTE M. RILEY District 3*

## STATEMENT

This bill establishes a three-year pilot program in the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to provide emotional support to children who: have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence; or have behavioral health care needs and are receiving services from the Divisions of Children's System of Care (DCSOC) or Child Protection and Permanency (DCPP) in DCF.

The Commissioner of DCF would establish the pilot program in the northern, central, and southern regions of the State, respectively, and solicit proposals from community-based organizations interested in participating in the pilot program. The bill also directs the commissioner to give preference to organizations that provide animal-assisted therapy services at the time the proposals are solicited.

The program would be designed to improve the therapeutic outcomes of victims of childhood trauma or violence and children with behavioral healthcare needs, and promote the healing benefits of human-animal bonding by providing animal-assisted therapy to children who meet the eligibility requirements provided in the bill.

As defined in the bill, "animal-assisted therapy" means a goal-directed intervention in which therapy animals are used as an integral part of the treatment process for children who have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence; or have behavioral health care needs. "Therapy animal" means a non-tasked trained dog that has received training to provide support to a person who has experienced mental, physical, emotional trauma; has witnessed, or is a victim of, an act of violence; or has behavioral health care needs.

Under the bill's provisions, the community-based organizations selected by the commissioner to participate in the pilot program would: provide animal-assisted therapy to children who have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence, or have behavioral health care needs and are receiving services from DCSOC or DCPP; educate, and provide information to, health care professionals, mental health providers, DCPP caseworkers, and behavioral health providers contracted with DCSOC on the healing value of therapy animals in dealing with traumatic events, including the value of the human-animal bond for children, and the benefits of animal-assisted therapy; allow for collaboration with health care professionals, mental health providers, DCPP caseworkers, and behavioral health providers contracted with DCSOC to incorporate animal-assisted therapy into the formulation of treatment modalities for, and the therapy or case plans of, children who have experienced mental, physical, or

emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence, or have behavioral health care needs; provide interactive empathetic training activities with therapy animals; develop a coordinated volunteer canine crisis response team to provide post traumatic debriefing and counseling services during and after traumatic events to victims of childhood trauma or violence; establish and implement a training and certification program for the volunteer and canine members of the canine response team established pursuant to the bill; and possess the staff to engage in animal-assisted therapy and provide the services outlined in the bill.

Subject to the guidelines adopted by the commissioner for the pilot program, a DCPD caseworker, behavioral health provider contracted with the DCSOC, school employee, health care professional, mental health provider, or health care facility may refer a child to the pilot program if the child: is between 5 and 21 years of age; has experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; has witnessed, or is a victim of, an act of violence; or has behavioral health care needs and is receiving services from DCSOC or DCPD; and the child's parent voluntarily consents to enroll the child in the program, as appropriate.

The bill directs the commissioner to apply for and accept any grant of money from the State or federal government, private foundations, or other sources, which may be available for animal-assisted therapy programs.

The bill requires the commissioner to compile data to determine the effectiveness of the pilot program in providing animal-assisted therapy to the children who participate in the pilot program, and within one year of the expiration of the bill, submit a report to the Governor and the Legislature on the effectiveness of the pilot program and make recommendations on how the program can be replicated throughout the State.

Finally, the bill appropriates \$100,000 from the general fund to DCF to implement the provisions of the bill.