

# Center for Youth Leadership

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*Why wait for someone else to make a difference?*

**Connecticut Legislature**  
**Judiciary Committee**  
*Testimony in Support of HB 5344:*  
*An Act Concerning Support for Animals That*  
*Are Neglected or Treated Cruelly*  
*February 24, 2016*

*Gabriella Duran and Bob Kocienda*

Hello Senator Coleman, Representative Tong and members of the committee. We have a special greeting for Representatives Fox, Simmons, Morris and Flexer, with whom we have worked in the past.

My name is Gabriella Duran and this is Bob Kocienda. On behalf of the 155 members of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk, we are here in support of HB 5344, *An Act Concerning Support for Animals That Are Neglected or Treated Cruelly*.

We agree with animal rights advocates that appointing an advocate would create a system for incorporating animals' interests into court proceedings. "It's not saying that the animal is a legal person," said David Favre, a professor at the University of Michigan. "It's saying that the animal has interests independent of the owner, and that these interests should be taken into account" (1).

We come at this from several perspectives. The Center for Youth Leadership addresses several social issues, including the link between animal cruelty and violence against people. We worked with Representative Diana Urban on a cross-reporting bill that requires child protection caseworkers and animal control officers to report families in which both forms of abuse are present. The bill was enacted as PA 11-194.

We have failed to convince lawmakers to create an animal abuse registry for the state and we've had similar luck trying to convince publicly and privately owned shelters and animal centers to conduct national criminal background checks on people who want to buy or adopt an animal.

And in our work with children who have been abused or witnessed family violence, we have come across several severe cases of animal cruelty. However, given the physical, emotional and sexual abuse experienced by family members, the cruelty against animal charges were often dropped.

While we agree with HB5344, we are concerned with the ability and willingness of the advocates to challenge judges and state's attorneys. According to State Representative Diana Urban, "...in Connecticut...statistics indicate that animal cruelty has been taken too lightly, with most arrests ending in plea bargains or light punishment, without much-needed counseling for psychological problems" (2).

We know these statistics are somewhat dated, but they may prove useful. "In 2005, there were 343 arrests in Connecticut related to animal abuse, with 34 ending with guilty pleas or convictions, while 272 were dismissed" (3). According to Representative Urban, "...since 90 percent of animal abuse cases a year are plea bargained or dropped, (we) allow repeat offenders to go unpunished" (4).

Therefore, you may want to consider adding a training component to HB5344, with judges, state's attorneys and the proposed court advocates the beneficiaries of information about animal rights. And it may be helpful to review the data collected by Rhode Island, which enacted a law similar to HB5344 in 2012.

Thank you.

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#### Notes

1. Stephen Kalin, "Animals May Get Legal Counsel in Connecticut," *Associated Press*, April 22, 2013.
2. Martin Cassidy, "Harsher Penalties Weighed for Cruelty," *Greenwich Time*, April 2, 2008.
3. Editorial, "We Need to Regain Focus on Animal Abuse," *Stamford Advocate*, April 5, 2008.
4. Don Stacom, "Greater Scrutiny for Cruelty," *Hartford Courant*, March 21, 2008.