

February 16, 2016

Testimony of Sandra L. Lok

Committee on Children Public Hearing

Raised Bill No. 5140

An Act Concerning The Use of Therapy Animals to Comfort Children Testifying in Certain Criminal Prosecutions

Madam Chairs and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for your consideration of my written testimony **in favor of Raised Bill 5140.**

My name is Sandra Lok and I live in Manchester, CT. I am past president and current Crisis Response Coordinator for Tails of Joy, a nonprofit animal assisted therapy organization with over 80 members, most of whom actively engage in providing the benefits of animal assisted activities and/or animal assisted therapy through their registered therapy animals. I currently volunteer in three schools and a nursing home with my three Golden Retrievers, Ginger, Nutmeg and Coriander. Sadly, my reason for not presenting my testimony in person to you today, is because Ginger, who is in her seventh year working as a registered therapy dog has been diagnosed with hemangio sarcoma, a cancer that takes its toll and most often the life of a dog.

I served on the Manchester Board of Education for ten years and in that capacity became all too familiar with the limited resources of our schools. I also worked at the State Department of Public Health. I retired from the State three years ago enabling me to pursue my dream of providing the comfort, soft fur and non judgmental nature of my dogs to the students in our schools in an effort to help teachers provide a pleasurable and therefore likely successful learning experience. In the dedication of a recently published book for which my dogs served as the inspiration, one child is quoted as writing: "I love working with Andy, Nutmeg and Ginger because they make me feel happy. They remind me of a huge cotton ball. Also, it really looks like they're listening."

Prior to retiring, I was charged with overseeing the Enforcement Unit for Child Day Care and Youth Camp Programs. In that role, I personally reviewed all of the evidence that was presented in actions the Department was proposing against programs. Many of our cases involved children who were alleged victims of abuse and/or neglect. Much of our evidence came from the Department of Children and Families. Prior to my supervisory position, I was an investigator for the Department, and as such would work together with a DCF investigating cases where allegations of abuse and/or neglect had been made. In all of my time (24 years) with the Department, though we once came close, we never provided the circumstances under which a child was brought forward to testify and recount for the Hearing Officer the often horrific acts against them. Our hearing were administrative rather than cases of criminal prosecution where the U.S.

Constitution allows a defendant to come face-to-face with an adverse witness, even if this witness is a child.

From this perspective, I share with you the scenario of a parent or guardian who is faced with the decision to assist in the pursuit of justice by allowing his/her child to testify in a Court of Law as to the acts of abuse the child may have endured.

In all of my hours working with children while they are offered the soft fur and non-judgmental comfort of my dogs, it is without a doubt that I believe this very same comfort would enable a child to recount any horrific event without again having to relive the trauma these acts caused.

Also, I wish for the record to reflect my sincerest gratitude to State Representative Diana Urban for her time and willingness to listen to Lauren Weihl-Crowley and me when we presented this concept as a possibility for Connecticut. I fully appreciate her enthusiasm while meeting with Lauren, me and two DCF staffers and am in awe of the fact that she already had a draft of the proposed legislation already written and in her hands for us to review.

Please support Raised Bill No. 5140

Thank you.