

February 24, 2026

Testimony of Joshua Levin, Legislative & Advocacy Manager

In SUPPORT of HB 5264 – An Act Concerning Service and Therapy Animals in Insurance Underwriting, the Appointment of an Advocate in Proceedings Concerning the Welfare or Custody of Companion Animals, Assault of a Domestic Animal and Establishing an Animal Abuse Task Force

Thank you, distinguished members of the Insurance and Real Estate Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony strongly supporting HB 5264.

Desmond's Law Expansion

Currently, Desmond's Law permits advocates to be appointed in cases "regarding the welfare or custody of a cat or dog."¹ However, animal abusers don't just victimize cats and dogs. **So, the law shouldn't stop at just cats and dogs.**

Since the passage of Desmond's Law in 2016, 40% of all animal cruelty cases in Connecticut have involved animals other than cats and dogs. This includes rabbits, hamsters, reptiles, horses, turtles, and more.² Additionally, cases with an appointed advocate are more likely to result in meaningful outcomes that hold defendants accountable for their actions and protect vulnerable populations from continued abuse.²

Volunteer advocates do more than just represent the animal. They provide context that tells the story of what happened leading up to, during, and after the abuse. They explain the defendant's pattern of behavior and highlight the human connection inherent in all animal cruelty cases. This is crucial because **animal cruelty is not an isolated crime** and cases must be monitored to identify criminal behavior patterns to prevent future violence.

The LINK between violence to people and violence to animals has been well-established for decades.³ Research shows that animal abuse serves as a better predictor of sexual assault than previous homicide, arson, or firearms convictions.⁴ Further, 63% of aggressive criminals reported deliberately causing harm to animals during their childhood and 71% of people who have dealt with intimate partner violence (IPV) have reported that their partner previously harmed, killed, or threatened their pets.⁴

These statistics are of the utmost significance because Connecticut is currently facing a dual crisis: an increase in animal cruelty crimes and a decrease in legal accountability for offenders. From 2023-24, animal cruelty crimes increased by 37%.⁵ From 2024-25 it's estimated that animal cruelty crimes once again rose by around 18%.⁶ Meanwhile, in 2024, 93% of disposed animal cruelty cases resulted in little to no meaningful consequences and in 2025, 80%.⁶

¹ Connecticut General Statutes. Section 54-86n. https://www.cga.ct.gov/current/pub/chap_961.htm#sec_54-86n

² Desmond's Army Animal Law Advocates. (2025). Desmond's Army Animal Law Advocates, the Passage of Desmond's Law in Connecticut and Analysis of Animal Cruelty Cases and Attorney Advocate Appointments from 2016-2025. https://www.desmondsarmy.org/files/ugd/75ac3d_d9e4c424c5ca46e6a1d48548c9e8f12e.pdf

³ American Humane. (n.d.). Facts About The Link Between Violence to People and Violence to Animals. <https://nationallinkcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Research-Summary.pdf>

⁴ National Link Coalition. (n.d.). The Link Between Violence to People and Violence to Animals. <https://nationallinkcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/LinkSummaryBooklet-16pp.pdf>

⁵ Department of Emergency Services & Public Protection. (Oct. 2025). Crime in Connecticut 2024 Annual Report. <https://portal.ct.gov/despp/-/media/despp-beta/pdf/data/crime-in-connecticut-2024-final.pdf?rev=47ac38d96fb34f64864f6b539850e0a5&hash=2CE90C21586A9406B7ED5C7A47A0E232>

⁶ Desmond's Army Animal Law Advocates. (2025). Rise of Animal Cruelty Cases in Connecticut. https://www.desmondsarmy.org/files/ugd/75ac3d_f5cfd4a472c42ba9ca964acd0f3bdc8.pdf

Animal cruelty is a warning sign for future violence and if we don't treat it with the severity it necessitates, we risk allowing continued harm not only to animals but to people as well.

The expansion of Desmond's Law to allow court-appointed advocates to represent all companion animals in animal cruelty cases is an essential step forwards as it will allow advocates to speak in the best interest of not only the animal, but society as a whole.

I respectfully encourage strengthening Desmond's Law expansion by permitting an appeal process should a judge deny an advocate appointment request.

Ending Insurance Discrimination Against Service & Therapy Animals

Insurance determinations should be grounded in objective factors such as documented training, demonstrated behavior, and actual risk history—**not generalized breed-based assumptions.**

Service animals are not household pets; they are medically necessary, highly trained partners that enable individuals with disabilities to live independently and safely in their communities.⁷ Therapy animals similarly provide clinically recognized emotional and psychological support in healthcare and community-based settings. Denying or canceling insurance coverage solely because of a dog's breed or the ownership of a trained service or therapy animal fails to reflect the critical function these animals serve.

Individuals who have complied with training standards and responsible ownership requirements should not be subjected to housing stability barriers due to breed-based exclusions that are based on outdated stereotypes. This provision represents a measured, common-sense safeguard that promotes fairness, dignity, and evidence-based underwriting practices while protecting people and animals who are already meeting their obligations.

Strengthening Animal Cruelty Penalties

Clarifying and strengthening penalties related to the assault of domestic animals sends a clear message that intentional harm to animals will be taken seriously. Research consistently shows a strong link between animal abuse and interpersonal violence. Addressing animal cruelty proactively is not only an animal welfare issue; it is a public safety issue. Stronger statutory clarity enhances deterrence, supports law enforcement, and reinforces the seriousness of these offenses.

Animal Abuse Task Force

The creation of an Animal Abuse Task Force is a pragmatic and forward-looking measure. Effective prevention requires coordination between law enforcement, prosecutors, veterinarians, social services, and community stakeholders. A task force will allow Connecticut to analyze trends, identify gaps, improve training, and ensure consistent enforcement statewide. Data-driven, collaborative approaches are essential to meaningful reform.

⁷ Office of Legislative Research. (2024). Service Animals and Registration. <https://cga.ct.gov/2024/rpt/pdf/2024-R-0090.pdf>