

Thank you for inviting me to testify in consideration of bill H.626. A little background on who I am, in relation to this bill.

My name is Erika Holm, and I live in Calais. I have lived in Vermont my entire life, have been deeply involved in animal welfare for 15-20 years, and have experience in many aspects of animal cruelty in our state, and with the fragmented system that attempts to resolve it. I have been an Animal Control Officer in two Central Vermont towns for almost 20 years, I am one of the Co-Executive Directors at Central Vermont Humane Society in East Montpelier, and I am the current Chairperson of the Animal Cruelty Investigation Advisory Board (the ACIAB). You may be aware that the ACIAB was created by the Vermont legislature in 2016, specifically to address our patchworked, and often ineffective, cruelty investigation process. The seats on the ACIAB are comprised of members from all of our State Agencies that have responsibilities for animals, such as Dept of Public Safety, Ag, Fish & Wildlife, State's Attorneys, as well as private and non-profit organizations such as the Vt League of Cities & Towns, dog breeders, shelters, and veterinarians. We have submitted annual reports to the legislature, and much of our work and recommendations were featured in the 2023 report from the Vermont Department of Public Safety, Act 147, Section 38, titled "Unification of Animal Welfare and Related Public Safety Functions".

From that report, a number of folks from the ACIAB, the Vermont Humane Federation, and concerned legislators worked to produce the legislation that became H.626, originally a comprehensive 60-page bill. While the bill before you is only a shadow of the original bill, it's a critical first step toward resolving the issues that are re-visited year after year. We need a single point of contact, responsible for the protection and safety of the animals of Vermont, and the people of Vermont. The original draft of the bill wove together three vital components of animal welfare in Vermont: 1. a unified, comprehensive plan for our animal cruelty laws to be enforced in a consistent, equitable, and legal way throughout the entire state, 2. Regulations of shelters and rescues in Vermont, with requirements to provide acceptable standards of care, and 3. Regulations and standards around the importation of companion animals into Vermont. Passing H.626 in it's current form will begin to build the framework to provide the comprehensive, efficient, and cost-effective solution we need, for a situation that is getting worse by the day.

I do want to comment that in my roles as ACO, and as a trained Humane Agent, I have worked with a number of law enforcement officers on a variety of cases, from State Police, to City Police, and Fish & Wildlife. The officers I've worked with have done the absolute best with the resources and support they've had, and I know first-hand that they've saved a number of lives. They can also tell you that there are lives that have been lost because of the structure of our system, and the confusion over who handles what.

I thank you for your time and consideration of this bill, and I'm happy to answer any questions you have for me.