



February 15, 2024

Vermont House Government Operations & Military Affairs Committee  
Testimony in support of H. 626

My name is Joanne Bourbeau. I have been a resident of Whitingham, VT since 1995 and serve as the volunteer board chair of the statewide Vermont Disaster Animal Response Team (VDART). I'm submitting this testimony on VDART's behalf in strong support of H. 626, An Act Related to Animal Welfare.

VDART is a member of the Vermont Humane Federation (VHF) and our mission is helping animals in crisis, providing emergency sheltering services for the pets of people who are the victims of natural or manmade disasters. We coordinate our services through our statewide non-profit, which supports the development and operation of several regional teams throughout the state that provide on-the-ground support. During the recent floods in July, VDART's Central Vermont Disaster Animal Response Team (CVDART) sheltered more than 70 animals over the course of 6 weeks in the Barre/Montpelier area for families who lost their homes (both temporarily and permanently) to the catastrophic flooding. While our primary focus is typically natural disasters, animal cruelty and animal hoarding situations can quickly become manmade disasters for law enforcement agencies and municipalities if local resources aren't available to assist.

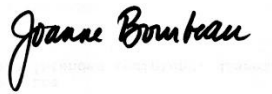
In February 2015, the VHF was called on by the Vermont State Police to assist with the removal of over 90 animals from an animal hoarding situation in Eden, Vermont. The owner was regularly importing animals from shelters in the southeast and warehousing them in her home. VDART brought our Companion Animal Mobile Equipment Trailer to the warehouse where the animals were brought post-seizure and loaned crates and other equipment in order to set up temporary housing for them. Thankfully in this case the owner surrendered the animals that were seized, so we only had to hold them temporarily until shelters could find permanent placement for them in their own adoption programs. Sadly, this isn't the situation for a lot of the cases that we work on here in Vermont. Without animal shelters willing to take in seized animals who are essentially evidence in a criminal investigation for an indeterminable amount of time, there would have been nowhere for these animals to go.

Wearing my other hat as the northeastern regional director for the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), I am a regular instructor of animal cruelty investigations at the Vermont Police Academy and the HSUS Animal Rescue Team has consulted with Vermont law enforcement agencies on dozens of cases. In 2011 we took possession of more than 60 Labradors removed from an animal hoarding situation in Franklin County and sheltered them for close to 2 months before a civil forfeiture of the animals was secured. Vermont's capability of effectively responding to animal cruelty cases has come to a critical juncture. There is no coordination of resources among agencies and no place for seized animals to be placed until the case has been adjudicated. Law enforcement agencies have had to resort to using the

homes of private citizen to hold animals who could be potentially dangerous or sick, and a proper chain of evidence must also be maintained in order to preserve the case for trial.

I have been directly involved with efforts to study the problems with Vermont's animal cruelty response system since 2000, when the state veterinarian at the time convened stakeholders to discuss how we could improve our response to these difficult, complicated and often emotional cases. Since that time multiple legislatively appointed task forces and working groups have all come to the same conclusion—that we need a coordinated and centralized response agency to support our municipalities and law enforcement agencies doing this difficult and costly work. Twenty-four years later, it's time to stop studying the problem and take meaningful action to protect not just animals but the public safety.

Please vote YES on H. 626.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joanne Bourbeau". Below the signature, there is a faint, small logo for the Vermont Disaster Animal Response Team.

Joanne Bourbeau, Chair  
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