

On behalf of the Windham County Humane Society, we feel strongly the committee must support H626. Vermont residents and their animals need better animal welfare regulations and enforcement of the regulations/laws, and the sector needs oversight.

I assumed the Executive Director position at WCHS in November of 2021. Before joining WCHS, I was the executive director at the Animal Welfare Association in Voorhees, New Jersey, and Director of Operations and Programs at the Maryland SPCA in Baltimore City.

One of the most challenging aspects of my job at WCHS has been understanding the fragmented animal welfare regulations and navigating cases of animal cruelty when the topic is treated like a game of hot potato – no one wants to take the lead or be accountable. As an underfunded private charity, WCHS doesn't have the physical or cash resources to house more than three impounded animals short term or until the conclusion of a trial.

Nearly ten years ago, WCHS had to house and care for 60+ dogs and 1 goat after inhumane conditions were found on Jesse Lynn Gentlewolf's property in Townshend, VT. During those months, the organization faced turning away animals and euthanizing others due to space limitations, and it depleted its meager savings by paying to board the dogs at various veterinary hospitals.

The implications of this case, being continuously underfunded, and the lack of ownership over cruelty investigations have been animal control officers, shelter staff, town officials, law enforcement, game wardens, and whoever else with a hand in the pot attempt to strategize before investigating a report of animal cruelty or neglect on how to persuade owners to sign over their pets vs. facing cruelty charges.

This allows the entities the ability to process the animals more quickly. Still, it also allows people to get away with inflicting pain and suffering because there are no ramifications for doing so.

Just a few months after joining WCHS, in February of 2022, our organization was sandwiched in the middle of another case when "21 starving hounds" were seized from a property due to inhumane conditions. While WCHS housed the dogs, it was unclear who oversaw the entire process, and there was inadequate evidence collection to move forward. After public outrage, the owner signed over the dogs and stated he would begin breeding more dogs to replace the 21 starving and neglected dogs removed from his property.

H626 needs to be funded and supported. Thank you so much.

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