



The Dorset Equine Rescue

2/12/24

My name is Jen Straub and I am the founder and executive director of the Dorset Equine Rescue. Our organization has been rescuing horses all over the state of Vermont, and in the surrounding states, since 2012. To date we have helped over 400 neglected and abused horses and several donkeys. I would like to thank you for this amazing opportunity to share my experiences and explain why H.626 is so important and needs to be passed.

Firstly: There is currently no **oversight, licensing or accreditation** required to operate an animal rescue, sanctuary or shelter in Vermont. There are many examples of under-qualified people starting up rescues and shelters. Their intentions may be good, but they often do not have the money, facility or expertise to properly run a rescue or care for the animals. Often animals that were “rescued” from one bad situation simply continue to suffer in a new, equally inappropriate location. This lack of oversight also leads to abuse of public trust: much of the public is unaware that 501(c)(3) non-profit status is merely a tax designation. It is relatively easy to obtain and does not guarantee quality or ethical conduct. The increase of organizations and individuals that claim to be rescues and shelters based solely on their status as non-profits is troubling and diverts much-needed funding from those groups who are capable of doing the most good.

Secondly: No one knows **who to contact in Vermont** when they witness animal cruelty or neglect. People routinely call the Dorset Equine Rescue when they have concerns about animal welfare and express, that prior to calling us, they have already reached out to multiple divisions of law enforcement only to be told by each to call someone else. Just last week, a concerned citizen reached out to us regarding conditions at a property with multiple horses. Two game wardens told her to call the sheriff, the sheriff told her to call the state police, who then told her to call the game wardens. Meanwhile, several weeks have gone by since the initial complaint and no one has been out to do a welfare check. It’s extremely frustrating for everyone involved. In some cases, by the time law enforcement goes out to do a welfare check (which could be weeks or months later), the animals are already dead or close to death from starvation.

In August of 2023, when the Dorset Equine Rescue was asked to assist with a case in Randolph, we found an emaciated horse in organ failure who had to be euthanized 24 hours after rescue. He was quite literally starved to death. This situation would have been completely preventable if time had not been wasted by being passed around trying to track down the appropriate law enforcement agency.

Thirdly: Accredited rescue organizations need **financial support** and funding by the state for caring for animals that are evidence in animal welfare investigations. These cases can drag on for a year or more, before animals are officially forfeited to the organizations that have been caring for them. It is only then, that the organizations can take steps to place them in appropriate adoptive homes. Horses are extremely expensive to care for and it's a strain on the resources of nonprofits and takes away their ability to help other horses in need. In Dorset Equine Rescue's case, it affects our ability to underwrite community programs and taking in owner surrenders. Last year we took in 31 rescue horses, 15 of who we held for the state, from multiple law-enforcement investigations. That is 50% of our capacity. You may be unaware that during the investigative and legal processes, all funding for care and veterinary services is covered by nonprofits like Dorset Equine Rescue, who must raise funds by continually appealing to the public.

Fourthly: There is a **deficiency of adequate training** for those who are expected to investigate and enforce issues pertaining to domestic animals. Law enforcement is already understaffed and does not (and should not need to) specialize in animal care. When the Dorset Equine Rescue get called upon to help with animal welfare investigations, law enforcement officers routinely express to us that they do not know the first thing about horses and have never run an animal welfare investigation before. Investigators without sufficient training do not always recognize the signs of neglect and abuse. They also can jeopardize the case by not knowing the proper protocol of an animal welfare investigation. Many times, I have had officers tell me that horses with clearly visible hip bones are not underweight and they compare them to cows, who naturally have clearly defined hip bones even when well-fed. These are two completely different animals for which the standards of good health vary considerably. If a horse's hip bones are visible, it is an indication that they are severely emaciated.

Lastly, I'd like to tell you about a situation that embodies all the above issues.

In 2022 we were called in by Vermont State Police to assist with a case in Tunbridge. A 501(c)(3) advertising itself as a horse rescue had been the focus of dozens of complaints over the course of a decade, but little action was taken. This was in great part because the responsibility for oversight of animal welfare had continually changed, and it was unclear as to who was in charge at any given time. With no centralized source of information, each new investigator had little knowledge of previous complaints and was unaware of the scope of the problem. At one point, several officers were dispatched, but due to their limited equine experience were easily misled by the farm owner. Finally, after being contacted by the Humane Society of the United States a state trooper with experience in the equine industry took an interest in the case and asked the Dorset Equine Rescue to assist law-enforcement in a seizure involving 20 animals living in horrendous conditions. The 13 equines were in horrific condition as was a llama and 6 dogs. Animals at the overcrowded property were found to be lacking adequate shelter and feed and many had been denied medical care. All were suffering from severe neglect and multiple horses had to be euthanized not long after their removal because the damage caused by long-term neglect was too extensive to be reversed. The equines were taken in by Dorset Equine Rescue and two sister equine rescues who covered all the expenses of caring for these animals for well over a year, with no state assistance, until being granted permanent custody by the courts. If the situation had been investigated by an experienced official when the complaints were first made, suffering could have been prevented, lives would have been saved, and the time, effort and expense of rescue and prosecution could have been avoided.

Formalizing and centralizing the reporting and investigative processes, as this bill will do, are important steps in letting law enforcement get back to doing the important work of protecting citizens without the distraction of handling animal complaints. Passing H.626 will create a system for Vermonters to report animal cruelty. It will provide investigators who are highly trained in identifying animal neglect and experienced in running animal welfare investigations from start to finish. It will protect both animal welfare and the public trust by creating a system for licensing and oversight of shelters, rescues and sanctuaries. Please consider passing this important bill.

Thank you,

Jen Straub
Founder/Executive Director
The Dorset Equine Rescue Inc.