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February 24, 2023

Representative Martin LaLonde, Chair  
Representative Thomas Burditt, Vice Chair  
Representative Kevin "Coach" Christie, Ranking Member  
House Judiciary Committee  
Vermont State House  
115 State Street  
Montpelier, VT 05633

Dear Chair LaLonde, Vice Chair Burditt, Ranking Member Christie, and honorable members of the House Judiciary Committee,

On behalf of the Animal Legal Defense Fund (ALDF) and our supporters in Vermont, we respectfully request support for *An Act relating to coercive controlling behavior and abuse prevention orders* (H.27), introduced by Representative Kate Donnelly. This important legislation expands protections for domestic violence victims by adding “coercive controlling behavior”—including “threatening to harm or abduct the animals that are connected to the family”—as a basis for obtaining a civil abuse prevention order against a family or household member.

ALDF is the nation's preeminent legal advocacy organization for animals. The organization's mission is to protect the lives and advance the interests of animals through the legal system, including animals too-often used as tools by abusers who exploit the close bond domestic violence victims have with their companion animals.

Although animal protection as an issue in its own right should not be glossed over, dozens of studies also document the strong link between animal cruelty and violence against humans,<sup>1</sup> such as intimate partner violence and child abuse, which has prompted a societal shift toward violence against animals being taken more seriously by law enforcement, judges, and policymakers.

Abusers may threaten or harm an animal in order to control or psychologically torment the animal's guardian. Sadly, this form of coercive control is extremely effective. According to several studies, approximately 50% of women in domestic violence shelters report they delayed their escape from their abuser out of fear for their animals, therefore it is imperative that the law assist victims of abuse—both human and animal—safely flee abusive situations.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Link Between Cruelty to Animals and Violence Toward Humans,” **Animal Legal Defense Fund** <<https://aldf.org/article/the-link-between-cruelty-to-animals-and-violence-toward-humans/>>; “Women with pets more likely to endure domestic abuse, study finds,” **CBC News** (2017) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/women-with-pets-more-likely-to-endure-domestic-abuse-study-finds-1.4151113>; **National Link Coalition** <<http://nationallinkcoalition.org>>.

Animals are living, feeling beings who need and deserve a legal status that reflects who they are: creatures with the capacity for pain and pleasure, joy and sorrow, fear and contentment. In the United States, most families with companion animals consider them to be a part of their family. Traditionally, however, animals have been treated as mere property under the law. More legislatures and courts are recognizing the flaws with this status quo and are beginning to consider animals' well-being, including in situations involving domestic violence.

A growing number of state legislatures—36 states, including Vermont, as of 2022—statutorily authorize the inclusion of companion animals in protective orders. Existing Vermont law ensures that a family or household member may seek relief from abuse by another family or household member on their own behalf or on behalf of their children by filing a complaint (15 V.S.A. § 1103). Included among the relief that the court may grant is an order concerning the possession, care, and control of any animal owned, possessed, leased, kept, or held as a 'pet' by either party or a minor child residing in the household.

Survivors of abuse should never have to make the difficult decision to leave their beloved companion animal in the hands of their abuser to escape a dangerous relationship.

**Comprehensive protective order legislation, like H.27, can help protect companion animals as well as human survivors of domestic violence.** H.27 expands the types of incidents and patterns of behavior that constitute abuse and enable a survivor to secure a protective order. Specifically, it defines coercive controlling behavior as “a pattern of conduct that has the purpose or effect of substantially restricting the plaintiff’s safety or autonomy through implicit or explicit threats, intimidation, or by compelling compliance.” Threatening to harm or abduct the animals that are connected to the family is among the enumerated behaviors constituting coercive control.

Research clearly shows that offenders of domestic violence often have a pattern of abuse involving all members of the household—including companion animals. Nearly three-quarters of women with companion animals who enter women’s shelters reported that their abuser had threatened, injured, maimed, or killed family companion animals for revenge or to psychologically control victims.<sup>2</sup>

By enacting H.27 Vermont has the opportunity to protect companion animals, help domestic violence survivors, and save the courts time and resources by establishing a more comprehensive statutory framework to consider when a survivor is obtaining a civil abuse prevention order against a family or household member. We encourage its advancement in the legislative process.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Harris

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<sup>2</sup> “Domestic Violence and Pets,” **Red Rover** <<https://redrover.org/domestic-violence-and-pets/>>; “Pets and Domestic Violence,” **National Coalition Against Domestic Violence** <<http://www.hope-eci.org/documents/petsanddv.pdf>>.