

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H

Thank you Representatives and members of the committee.

My name is Heather Bent, and I am speaking on behalf of VAACA, Vermonters Against Animal Cruelty and Abandonment in support of H.578. I am also the founder of Potter's Angels Rescue, established in 2010, and I have assisted with animal cruelty cases for over ten years. Since 2021, I have served as the Animal Control Officer for Marshfield, and I currently operate a dog boarding and daycare facility, Four Paws Inn, in Barre, Vermont.

Throughout my work in animal welfare, I have focused on implementing solutions rather than becoming overwhelmed by systemic failures. That approach led to the creation of VAACA, which I co-founded with Renee Falconer in 2024 and obtained nonprofit status in January 2025.

VAACA operates as a collaborative, statewide initiative working alongside animal control officers, law enforcement, veterinarians, animal behavior experts, rescues, and shelters. It is our mission to advocate for and support animals in Vermont that have been victims of abuse, abandonment, and neglect. We provide guidance, connect resources and offer support to facilitate a coordinated effort and effective response to emerging needs within the state.

In collaboration with animal control officers and law enforcement, we strive to enhance the enforcement of our current animal protection laws and endorse improvements to better protect animals in Vermont which is why I am here today.

As you may know, Vermont faces many challenges in animal welfare, but today I am here to focus on the solutions offered in H.578 and why this legislation is urgently needed.

Under current law, animals seized for cruelty or neglect can remain in custody for months—or even years—while cases slowly move through the court system.

Animal cruelty cases typically take **6 to 18 months** to resolve. Behavioral decline in a shelter setting often begins within **a few weeks**.

During this time:

- Animals deteriorate behaviorally due to the stress of isolation
- Adoptability declines
- Shelters and rescues absorb overwhelming costs
- Courts lack consistent cost-recovery methods
- And in some cases, animals are returned to their abusers, forcing animal advocates to violate their moral and ethical obligations to protect those animals.

These outcomes are not rare or isolated. They are a common occurrence in Vermont.

Care costs average **\$20–\$40 per day per animal**, including food, staffing, and basic care.

Due to length of time in limbo, costs frequently reach **\$5,000–\$15,000 per animal**, and far more in multi-animal cases.

Currently, these costs are absorbed by rescues, municipalities, and volunteers—not by those responsible for the abuse. This must change.

For these reasons there has been a systemic breakdown in enforcement.

After repeatedly being burned by this system, rescues and shelters are increasingly unable or unwilling to accept seized animals. As a result, law enforcement's ability to enforce cruelty laws has been severely compromised.

I have personally been told by game wardens and law enforcement officers that they were instructed by superiors not to seize animals due to the lack of placement options and funding. State attorneys have declined to pursue search warrants for the same reason—leaving animals in environments where they continue to suffer.

Until Vermont provides the tools and support necessary to enforce and prosecute its animal protection laws, those laws will remain largely inconsequential.

Civil forfeiture was introduced into statute in 2014, yet animals are still trapped in legal limbo—treated as property that can be stashed somewhere indefinitely. Animals are sentient beings. They require daily care, socialization, exercise, medical attention, food, and shelter. They cannot simply be stuffed in a corner and forgotten about.

Shelters and volunteer organizations have been taken for granted—expected to shoulder unreasonable financial and moral burdens for extended periods of time. Many are drained of resources while being told, in some cases, to return animals to their abusers, violating every ethical principle they stand for.

This system is neither reasonable nor sustainable. Vermont has burned critical bridges by failing to address these enforcement failures.

Assigning financial responsibility for seized animals to their owners is the most reasonable and just solution.

The care of animals entails ongoing costs and requiring owners to either bear those costs or relinquish ownership, is consistent with established principles of responsible ownership.

Based on documented experience, animals subject to seizure have exhibited clear indicators of neglect, as verified by licensed veterinarians. Animal ownership carries enforceable duties, including providing adequate food, shelter, veterinary care, and protection from suffering. When an animal is seized, those ethical obligations have already been breached.

If an owner is unable or unwilling to assume the financial and practical responsibilities necessary for proper care, termination of ownership rights is an appropriate and proportionate remedy. Ownership should be treated as a responsibility—not an entitlement.

The Importance of Education and Intervention

H.578 also recognizes that accountability includes rehabilitation. H.578 gives courts the authority to require education, treatment, and counseling for offenders—addressing the underlying behaviors that lead to cruelty which is an essential component of prevention. The data are clear.

Animal cruelty is strongly linked to broader patterns of violence:

- Individuals who abuse animals are **3–5 times more likely** to commit violent crimes against people
- **Up to 71%** of domestic violence victims report pets being threatened or harmed

- **88%** of households under child protective services investigation also report animal abuse

Because of these correlations, the FBI classifies animal cruelty as a **Group A violent offense**.

This is a public safety issue—not a minor crime.

Approximately **70%** of individuals charged with animal cruelty have committed at least one other crime, and nearly **40%** have prior violent crime convictions. When cruelty is minimized early, opportunities for intervention and prevention are lost.

Why H.578 Matters

These reforms being presented:

- Clarify cruelty definitions
- Establish consistent cost-of-care recovery
- Require meaningful animal possession bans
- Create clearer forfeiture and custody pathways

Most importantly, they move Vermont from a reactive system to a preventative one—reducing repeat offenses, prolonged suffering, and the misuse of public and nonprofit resources.

As Vermont improves coordination and data collection, these reforms ensure that future data reflects effective intervention, not preventable harm.

Closing

VAACA strongly urges the committee to advance H.578.

Animals cannot testify for themselves. These reforms ensure Vermont's laws speak clearly and firmly on their behalf—while also protecting public safety and public resources.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to protecting Vermont's most vulnerable.