



Humane World for Animals™

To: Chair Hashim and Honorable Members of the Vermont Senate Judiciary Committee
From: Joanne Bourbeau, Northeastern Regional Director, Humane World for Animals
Date: April 17, 2026
Re: Support for H. 578, An act relating to penalties and procedures for animal cruelty offenses

My name is Joanne Bourbeau and I'm the northeastern regional director for Humane World for Animals (formerly the Humane Society of the United States) residing in Whitingham, VT. Thank you, Chair Hashim and Committee members, for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of this animal welfare bill.

I have lived and worked in Vermont for over 30 years in my current role, during which time I've consulted and worked side-by-side with law enforcement agencies across the state on animal welfare investigations. I'm also a regular instructor of animal cruelty investigations at the Vermont Police Academy. This past spring Humane World conducted a special training for animal control officers at the Vermont Law School on how to partner successfully with law enforcement on these cases.

Humane World supports this bill because it fills a critical gap in how Vermont responds to cases of animal cruelty. Across the country, and here in Vermont, animal agencies are frequently called to assist law enforcement with large-scale cruelty cases involving dozens or even hundreds of animals who require extensive, long-term care.

Even though Humane World doesn't have investigatory powers here in Vermont we are often called on to provide an opinion and/or resources to support these investigations. The number one question law enforcement and municipal agencies have is "where are we going to bring the animals if we seize them." Sadly, we don't always have an answer for them. As the Vermont Humane Federation (VHF) will attest, our statewide network of private non-profit animal shelters simply doesn't have the capacity or funding to hold seized animals indefinitely on behalf of the state.

Fortunately, there is a proven legislative solution to this problem. Bond and forfeiture cost-of-care laws shift the financial responsibility for caring for animals seized due to cruelty from animal agencies and taxpayers to the animals' owners and help animals transition into new homes rather than languish in shelters. States that have enacted bond and forfeiture cost-of-care laws have seen these provisions help law enforcement and shelters respond to cases of animal cruelty without busting budgets or leaving animals to languish. This approach is also fair to owners by ensuring opportunities to be heard to challenge the legality of the seizure and costs of animal care.

While we are disappointed that added cost of animal care provisions in the House version of the bill were removed before final passage, we're grateful to the Senate for taking up this important measure and focusing on improving our existing civil forfeiture procedures and timelines. Cost of Animal Care laws using the bonding and forfeiture model have a strong track record across the country because they allow a seizing agency or custodial caregiver—which are highly motivated to resolve disposition of the animals—to file for the petition, ensuring timely resolution. They also require proof that the seizure was lawful, rather than proving on an expedited timeline that each animal (in what could be a large case) was subjected to illegal cruelty, and narrow the court's role to assessing the legality of the warrant and the reasonableness of costs rather than whether the owner will lose his or her animals.

We are also extremely supportive of making the crime of animal sexual abuse a felony under *any* circumstance. According to the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law, the number of bestiality-related

arrests has risen by nearly 800% since 2000. In 2017, Vermont took an important step forward by enacting legislation explicitly prohibiting sexual contact with animals, closing a longstanding gap in state law and aligning Vermont with the majority of other states. This was a significant advancement in protecting animals from abuse. However, real-world cases since then have revealed remaining deficiencies in the statute. These gaps hinder law enforcement's ability to investigate and prosecutors' ability to effectively charge and convict offenders in certain circumstances of animal sexual abuse.

A stronger, more comprehensive law is essential—not only to safeguard animals but also to address broader public safety concerns. Extensive research, including clinical assessments of sexual offenders, demonstrates a well-documented link between bestiality and an elevated risk of child sexual abuse. For example, in a large-scale study of over 44,000 adult males evaluated for sexual misconduct, sexual contact with animals emerged as the single strongest predictor of increased risk for sexually molesting a child. (This finding, presented by researchers including Gene Abel and colleagues, has been cited in forensic psychiatry and psychology literature as a key risk indicator.)

Offenders often connect through online platforms and websites, where they exchange information, trade animals, rent them, or sell them specifically for sexual purposes. These networks—and the broader population engaging in animal sexual abuse—have exploited weaknesses in Vermont's current law, particularly the absence of explicit prohibitions on creating, possessing, or disseminating videos or images depicting such abuse (commonly referred to as animal sexual pornography or "zoophilic" content). Given the strong connection between animal sexual abuse and child abuse, we would also be supportive of making sharing this type of pornography with a minor a felony.

H.578 directly addresses these shortcomings by closing critical loopholes, including clear bans on the production and distribution of such material. These updates would empower authorities to more effectively disrupt online networks, prevent further exploitation of animals, and intervene earlier in patterns of behavior that research links to serious interpersonal harms.

This bill represents a targeted, evidence-informed improvement that enhances animal protection, strengthens enforcement, and contributes to community safety. For these reasons, Humane World urges a favorable report on this bill. Thank you.



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