

**JOINT TESTIMONY TO HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
IN OPPOSITION TO 21-H 5040, THE ANIMAL ABUSER REGISTRY ACT
February 9, 2021**

While our organizations understand the well-intentioned goals of H-5040, which would create a public animal abuse registry, our organizations – representing a diverse array of constituencies – have deep concerns about the extensive negative implications of this type of registry. As a result, we oppose passage of this legislation.

This bill proposes to create a registry under which an individual in Rhode Island who is convicted of any felony related to animal cruelty is required to register as such for fifteen years or longer, and to have that information made available on a publicly accessible website. However, evidence strongly suggests the ineffectiveness of registries like these, which only serve to further criminalize and marginalize the behaviors of those with mental health disorders, make reintegration and rehabilitation difficult for ex-offenders, and impose further criminal penalties on individuals who fail to follow proper registration procedures.

- Animal abuse registries are not supported by some leading animal welfare organizations, like the ASPCA and the American Kennel Club, in recognition that these registries are ineffective, show no evidence of having an impact on incidents of animal cruelty, and waste limited financial resources dedicated to animal welfare.
- The registry would encompass offenses that have a documented connection to mental illness. For example, the bill’s preamble specifically cites “hoarders” as the type of animal abuser the legislation is seeking to target. But hoarding of animals is a psychiatric disorder, and recognized as such in the DSM-5. In addition to already subjecting them to potentially severe criminal penalties, instead of providing mental health support, this bill would further stigmatize and harm these individuals and the animals they compulsively collect.
- As is the case with sex offender registries, which have also not been found to be effective, an animal abuse registry is likely to promote the harassment of ex-offenders – including those with mental illness – seeking to integrate themselves into the community or simply trying to remain in their own neighborhood.
- This legislation would further subject ex-offenders, who have already completed their sentences, to additional criminal penalties – including up to a year in prison – if they fail to follow the specified registration requirements any time they are released from prison or move. This punishment will cause an undue hardship to many poor defendants with unstable housing patterns.
- The bill places an inappropriate burden on animal shelters under threat of financial penalties for failing to check the registry. However, very few targets of animal cruelty are acquired through shelters with the intent to be targets of abuse.

In short, passage of this bill is poor public policy and could lead to a host of unintended consequences. Its implementation will not only be ineffective, but will unduly harm individuals with mental illness.

For all the reasons cited above, we respectfully urge the Committee not to support this legislation.

Sincerely,

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