

The Connecticut General Assembly



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Rep. Urban, Animal Advocates Call for Passage of Desmond's Law

Bill would provide legal advocates for abused animals

Representative Diana Urban (D-Stonington) held a press conference today along with animal welfare advocates to call on the legislature to pass Desmond's Law. HB 5344, An Act Concerning Support For Animals That Are Neglected Or Treated Cruelly, would allow courts to assign volunteer legal advocates to assist in the prosecution of animal abuse cases. The bill has been named in honor of Desmond, a dog that was beaten, starved, strangled, and ultimately killed by its owner, who then received accelerated rehabilitation.

From 2002 to 2012, only 18 percent of animal cruelty cases in Connecticut yielded a conviction. The rest were either dismissed or state's attorneys chose not to pursue them. Bill supporters hope that having law school students act as courtroom advocates will provide prosecutors an additional resource and increase convictions.

"Animal cruelty is an act of violence. As of this year the FBI is tracking it as a separate category of the same magnitude as manslaughter and armed robbery. It is also a red flag for future violent behavior," said **Rep. Urban**. "The law is called 'Desmond's Law' to highlight the connection between animal cruelty and domestic violence. Desmond was beaten and strangled in an incident of ongoing domestic violence,"

Rep. Urban continued, "The conviction rate for animal cruelty in Connecticut is 18 percent. By allowing law students to act as advocates and collect and report all the data around a particular case of egregious animal cruelty, we give the courts another resource at no added cost and an opportunity to interrupt this cycle of violence. This bill can help protect children, domestic partners, the elderly, and animals at no cost to the state. It is really a win-win situation."

"Far too many animal cruelty cases have been dismissed or nulled in our courts resulting in weakened sentences. When these cases are met with accelerated rehabilitation sentences, the public has no way of knowing about the nature of the arrest," said **Rep. Brenda Kupchick** (R-

Fairfield). “Placing animal advocates inside the courts to be a voice for defenseless innocent victims while sharing the serious nature of the violence could potentially change the judicial statistics, protect the public and at no cost to the state.”

“I am pleased to join with my colleague Rep. Urban in the efforts to give a voice to defenseless animals and to hold those that would do offhanded harm to them accountable for their actions,” **Rep. Jack Hennessy** (D-Bridgeport) said.

Numerous animal welfare organizations attended, including activists from Connecticut Votes for Animals, the Connecticut Humane Society, the Humane Society of the United States, and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). Renee DiNino, radio personality at River 105.9, also joined Rep. Urban. DiNino has been a vocal advocate for Desmond’s Law, regularly using her radio show to raise awareness of the bill and provide her listeners updates.

“I strongly support Desmond's Law. Having a voice for the innocent animals in court would ensure a stronger chance that animal cruelty laws already in place are enforced,” said DiNino. “Desmond touched the lives of so many, his photo remains in my studio to this day to remind me we have to fight for those who can't fight for themselves, animals and humans. When we're kinder to animals, we're kinder to people. This law is not just for animals, but for everyone.”

Data shared by the Department of Correction and Department of Agriculture has shown a strong correlation between animal abuse and domestic violence. The man who killed Desmond was also accused of strangling his girlfriend, but those charges were dropped.

“Desmond's Law would create an innovative new program for early intervention in the cycle of violence,” said Amy Harrell, president of Connecticut Votes for Animals. “In a time of shrinking budgets and limited resources, we have law students and attorneys eager to volunteer their services to the courts. Their efforts would benefit not only animals, but families, and ultimately contribute to the safety of our communities.”

“Intentionally causing pain and suffering to an animal, whether through acts of violence or neglect, is an act of violence based upon the need for power and domination. Research and common sense tells us that those capable of such acts can and will do it again and very likely against humans,” said Gordon Willard, Executive Director of the Connecticut Humane Society. “Animal cruelty needs to be taken seriously by our police, prosecutors and courts. Advocating for the animals in court is a way to satisfy justice and to protect other animals and people from the same fate.”

The bill does not have a fiscal note. The Judiciary Committee voted in favor of the bill in March and it now goes to the House.

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