

Center for Youth Leadership

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

Connecticut Assembly's Select Committee on Children

Hearing about the link between animal cruelty and violence against people

Testimony, October 5, 2010

Good morning Senator Musto, Representative Urban, members of the Committee on Children and members of the Human Services Committee. We have a special greeting for Senator Boucher and Representative Camillo, both of whom are familiar with our work.

My name is Carly Cordovano and this is Molly Yordon. We are speaking on behalf of the 126 members of the Senators Community Foundation, which is a program of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk.

We very much appreciate your invitation to say a few words about the link between animal cruelty and violence against people. We have had ongoing conversations with members of the committee about this issue, and we last spoke about it formally during last year's legislative session.

Child abuse prevention has been the focus of our public awareness and social change campaigns since 1999. The fact that the link between animal cruelty and violence against people is just the fourth subtopic that we've added to our work in eleven years points to its importance.

For two years now we have been educating people our age and others in lower Fairfield County about the link. We stand on street corners and hand out literature, many times as we wear animal mascot costumes. In fact, our homecoming football game is on Friday and we'll be at the entrance of the stadium wearing the costumes. We've met with animal control officers and DCF caseworkers in Norwalk and Bridgeport. We have created body art posters about the topic and our members have placed public awareness notes in bags with animal crackers and handed them out to our classmates as they walk to class. And we testified last year in support of legislation.

These and other public awareness activities are based on the scores of studies we have reviewed about the link. Several stand out:

1. A study of 1,000 college students and their exposure to violence found that 62 percent who witnessed or committed animal cruelty as a child had also experienced child abuse or domestic violence.
2. A 2009 study found that witnessing animal cruelty was the number one predictor of future violence by the witness.
3. The Humane Society of the United States found that 20 to 31 percent of the intentional animal cruelty cases every year are committed by people my age. The stories and statistics are no better closer to our hometown of Norwalk. We were horrified by the countless stories we heard from classmates who use pellet guns to shoot small animals. And according to the animal control officer in Bridgeport, of the 550 animal cruelty cases his office investigates every year, half are committed by teens 13-16 years of age.
4. According to a 2007 study, 67 percent of the children residing in family violence shelters reported witnessing abuse of their family pet; 37 percent of the children progressed to harming or killing pets.
5. Over a five day period in May 2010 our members called 37 animal shelters and rescue centers in New York, Connecticut and Massachusetts. None conduct national criminal background checks of people looking to adopt a pet.
6. Representative Urban's Task Force on the Circle of Violence reported that of the 1,400 cases of animal cruelty that were brought before Connecticut's courts from 2004 through 2007, 84 percent were dismissed, *with nothing done to assess other acts of violence*. This brings to mind the attempts by legislators in California and Tennessee to create animal offender registries similar to those for sex offenders.

But what really moved us to act is the volunteer work we do with children who have been abused. Every week for the past seven years our members have volunteered at a domestic violence safe house and a crisis center for children who have been abused.

We cannot begin to tell you how many times we have heard 5-6-7 year old children talk about how their abusive parent kicks and punches the family pet just as he kicks and punches mommy; or the number of drawings we've seen that show a child hurting an animal because "...it seems like fun" or because "...I saw my daddy do it;" or the number of times during play that a child will include some sort of violent behavior towards an imaginary animal.

It is for these reasons that we suggest you examine the following items from the public awareness campaign that we launched in September:

1. Cross-training and cross-reporting by animal control officers and Department of Children and Families caseworkers;

2. veterinarians as mandated reporters of animal cruelty;
3. creation of an animal abuse registry;
4. reform of the criminal justice system to educate prosecutors about the link between the issues and for the courts to assess other acts of violence committed by animal and child abusers; and
5. national criminal background checks by animal shelters of people who want to adopt a pet.

We know these issues will not become reality without a good amount of political will and a fair amount of money. We know that caseworkers and animal control officers have more work than they can handle. We know that some vets are concerned about liability issues when it comes to reporting suspected cases of animal cruelty. And we know that it takes an incredible amount of time to change the criminal justice system.

But we know these obstacles can be overcome with some creative thinking and persistence. For example, last year your fellow legislators responded to the hundreds of e-mails and phone calls we made in support of teen dating violence and human trafficking legislation. Both bills were signed into law.

As you continue to gather information about the link between animal cruelty and violence against people, we urge you to consider the points we have raised.

Thank you.

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