

Senate Executive Departments and Administration Committee

Ben Mickens 271-1403

SB 573, establishing certification standards for facility comfort dogs.

Hearing Date: January 14, 2026

Time Opened: 1:12 p.m.

Time Closed: 1:46 p.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Reardon, Pearl, McGough and Gannon

Members of the Committee Absent : Senator Altschiller

Bill Analysis: This bill establishes certification standards for facility comfort dogs, facility comfort dog handlers, and facility comfort dog handling teams.

Sponsors:

Sen. Birdsell

Sen. Fenton

Sen. Gannon

Sen. Pearl

Sen. Ward

Rep. Moffett

Rep. Morton

Who supports the bill: Senator Regina Birdsell, Senator Ruth Ward, Senator Howard Pearl, Senator Donovan Fenton

Who opposes the bill: Curtis Howland

Who is neutral on the bill:

Summary of testimony presented in support:

Senator Regina Birdsell

- Senator Birdsell introduced and testified in support of Senate Bill 573.
- Senator Birdsell established that comfort dogs are trained to provide emotional support, comfort, and crisis response for individuals who are experiencing stress through trauma or crises.
- Senator Birdsell noted that during her tenure as chair of the PTSD Commission, she heard many positive accounts about the use of comfort dogs, while also becoming aware of challenges related to their acceptance in certain business settings.

- She established that due to the lack of comfort dog standards in the State of New Hampshire and across the country, the PTSD Commission created a subcommittee focused on developing the comfort dog standards that are in SB 573.
- She stated that the bill allows comfort dogs to be owned by facilities.
- She established that Sections I through X of the bill are definitions.
- She stated that the proposed certification process starts to be detailed on page three. She shared that the certifications and ongoing training the bill requires are from the American Kennel Club.
- Section three of the bill calls for detailed records to be kept on the training the comfort dogs and the handlers receive.
- Senator Pearl asked whether line thirteen establishes that the facility owns the dog or if it is employed. Senator Birdsell stated she will speak with the appropriate stakeholders to provide the committee with further clarification.
- Senator Birdsell stated that this bill permits the handler and the dog to enter any public facility in the state. She recalled that after a traumatic incident at a Walmart, comfort dogs were not allowed to be dispatched to the scene.
- She explained the specific dog care measures that the bill requires for the facilities. The standards are designed to maintain the health and well-being of the dogs, including the process of retiring the comfort dogs.
- Senator Pearl asked if leasing comfort dogs was an option. Senator Birdsell said she will discuss that with the stakeholders, but she prefers ownership over leasing.
- Senator Pearl inquired whether the bill would address spaying and neutering. Senator Birdsell stated she will consult with the relevant stakeholders to provide the committee with more clarification.
- Senator McGough asked whether “fully insured” should be understood as limited to liability insurance or if it also includes pet health insurance. Senator Birdsell stated that the committee envisioned it to mean liability insurance.

Bradley Osgood, Concord Police Chief

- Chief Osgood testified in support of SB 573.
- He stated there are a few more areas that need to be worked out before the bill’s passage, but the subcommittee remains committed to finalizing the bill for the committee.
- He established that the program started in New Hampshire in 2018 with one dog. The program has since grown to forty dogs, and he believes it is the right time to introduce standards and training.

Justin Breton, Mental Health & Wellness Coordinator, Manchester Police Department

- Mr. Brenton testified in support of SB 573.
- Mr. Brenton stated that the goal of the bill is to establish structure, safety, and accountability for comfort dog programs through training and certification standards.
- Mr. Brenton said that this bill results from the collaboration of a wide range of stakeholders, including all aspects of emergency services personnel, the community, trainers, breeders, and handlers.
- Mr. Brenton stated that comfort dog programs foster a new relationship between the community and the police department.
- He established that the goal of the legislation is to train, certify, and recertify regularly to ensure continuity among the programs in the state.
- He stated that much of the success of the comfort dog program happens within his own police department as it relates to first responder mental health.

David Goldstein, Mental Health & Wellness Coordinator, Rockingham County Sheriff's Office

- Mr. Goldstein testified in support of SB 573.
- He stated that his comfort dog program was the second to be implemented in the state, and that once his comfort dog was active, it saved the life of a middle school student.

Holly Stevens, NAMI NH

- Ms. Stevens testified in support of SB 573.
- She established baseline statistics for New Hampshire residents and first responders experiencing mental illness and mental health crises.
- She stated that comfort dogs help ease trauma for individuals who experience traumatic events and can serve as a bridge within communities or organizations.

Detective Rochelle Jones, Community Outreach Coordinator, Portsmouth Police Department

- Detective Jones testified in support of SB 573.
- She asked the committee to consider amending the term to “comfort facility dog” instead of “facility comfort dog”. This request was based on the fact that nearly all other working dogs have the first word in their name, with therapy dogs provided as an example.

Laura Barker, Founder of Hero Pups

- Ms. Barker testified in support of SB 573.
- She stated that the dog provisions of the bill still have a few areas that need further revision.

- Senator Reardon asked if she could explain how the dogs start out and the impact it has in the facility. Ms. Barker responded that they typically begin as puppies. The puppies receive a profile to determine which dog is the right fit to become a comfort dog. The prospective dogs are then immersed in the typical environmental exposures they would encounter as comfort dogs.

Lenny O’Keefe, Concord Police Department

- Mr. O’Keefe testified in support of SB 573.
- He described the work that the department’s comfort dog does with children at the Children's Advocacy Center. The dog stays with the child before and after their forensic interviews, as well as before and after they testify in court.
- Mr. O’Keefe sees the comfort dog program as a proactive approach to policing.

Summary of testimony presented in opposition: None.

Neutral Information Presented: None.

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Date Hearing Report completed: January 19, 2026