

Testimony for HB1438:

I am writing to express my support for this bill and to offer a professional perspective based on my work with individuals experiencing interpersonal violence.

Throughout my career as a social worker, I have worked with many individuals who were either currently in domestic violence situations or had previously been subjected to or witnessed domestic violence. In every case in which an animal was present in the home, there was also animal abuse occurring. Abusers frequently use animals as part of their strategies to assert control over others. Family pets are deeply loved and inherently vulnerable, and abusers understand the power they hold in controlling the well-being of these animals.

Coercive control is a primary tactic used by abusers and generally presents as a pattern of behaviors designed to dominate a victim by restricting autonomy, isolating them, and instilling fear. I have heard numerous accounts of animal neglect, violence, and even torture carried out in front of household members in order to exert control. In these situations, the animal often becomes a reminder of what could happen to other members of the household if they do not comply with the abuser.

If mental health providers are able to report these instances, it would serve as an important and actionable step towards addressing domestic violence. What we know about domestic violence is that it escalates. What may begin as aggression toward an animal more often than not progresses over time into physical violence toward other members of the household.

I believe it is time for the State of New Hampshire to follow the lead of other states by establishing mandated reporting of animal abuse as settled law.

I would also like to propose a few amendments to this bill:

1. The bill language states that all mental health workers under the Mental Health Board are subject to this mandate; I support clarifying that this includes all licensed and pre-licensed individuals.
2. I would like the language “mental health caseworker” to be adjusted to mental health professional, as “caseworker” denotes something very specific in terms of social work.
3. In order to protect mental health providers and ensure consistent decision-making, I propose that the bill directly reference RSA 644:8, New Hampshire’s established animal cruelty statute. Clear statutory grounding would provide an exact framework for determining when a report is required.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope you will recognize the importance of this bill in supporting the safety and well-being of New Hampshire residents.