



April 2025

Representative Robert E. Craven, Chair
Representative Carol Hagan McEntee, First Vice Chair
Representative Jason Knight, Second Vice Chair
House Committee on Judiciary
Rhode Island General Assembly
82 Smith Street, Providence, RI 02903

Re: Support for HB 5125 to protect survivors of domestic violence and their pets

Honorable Chair Craven, Chairs Hagan McEntee and Knight, and members of the House Committee on Judiciary,

On behalf of the Animal Legal Defense Fund (ALDF) and the National LINK Coalition and our collective supporters in Rhode Island, thank you for this opportunity to support for *An Act Relating To Domestic Relations – Domestic Abuse Prevention* (HB 5125). We thank Representative John J. Lombardi for introducing this legislation with Representatives Hull, Ajello, Stewart, and Felix. We are grateful to the General Assembly for your ongoing commitment to animal protection.

ALDF is the nation's preeminent legal advocacy organization for animals. Our mission is to protect the lives and advance the interests of animals through the legal system, including animals too-often used as tools by abusers who exploit the close bond domestic violence victims have with their companion animals.

The National Link Coalition, founded in Maine in 2008, serves as the global resource center on The Link between animal cruelty and human violence. The Coalition is the only internationally-focused educational and advocacy organization working to prevent animal cruelty by demonstrating how animal abuse is part of a broader pattern of individual and community violence, often intersecting with domestic violence, child maltreatment, and elder abuse.

Enacting HB 5125 will ensure the court may, specifically, award custody of a household pet to the plaintiff in a protective order. It allows family court to choose to protect the pet(s) of a domestic violence survivor as part of an order to protect and support the plaintiff from abuse or sexual exploitation.

This legislation is a logical next step for Rhode Island after passing a "pet custody" law in 2024 and "pet protective orders" law in 2019. The **pet custody law** ensures the court considers the interests of pets in divorce and separation proceedings when awarding sole or joint. Eight states and Washington D.C. have adopted similar pet custody laws. The **pet protective orders law** allows the court to provide in the order for the safety and welfare of all household animals and pets. Forty-one states statutorily authorize the inclusion of companion animals in protective orders.

Although animal protection as an issue in its own right should not be glossed over, dozens of studies also document the strong link between animal cruelty and violence against humans,ⁱ such as intimate partner violence and child abuse, which has prompted a societal shift toward violence against animals being taken more seriously by law enforcement, judges, and policymakers.

Research clearly shows that offenders of domestic violence often have a pattern of abuse involving all members of the household—including companion animals. Abusers may threaten or harm an animal in order to control or psychologically torment the animal's guardian. Sadly, this form of coercive control is extremely effective. Nearly three-quarters of women with companion animals who enter women's shelters reported that their abuser had threatened, injured, maimed, or killed family companion animals for revenge or to psychologically control victimsⁱⁱ and half of women in domestic violence shelters report they delayed their escape from their abuser out of fear for their animals. It is, therefore, imperative that the law assist victims of abuse—both human and animal—safely flee abusive situations.

Animals are living, feeling beings who need and deserve a legal status that reflects who they are: creatures with the capacity for pain and pleasure, joy and sorrow, fear and contentment. In the United States, most families with companion animals consider them to be a part of their family. Traditionally, however, animals have been treated as mere property under the law. More legislatures and courts are recognizing the flaws with this status quo and are beginning to consider animals' well-being and their bond with a human guardian, including in situations involving domestic violence.

Survivors of abuse should never have to make the difficult decision to leave their beloved companion animal in the hands of their abuser to escape a dangerous relationship.

Importantly, effective pet protective order and pet custody laws can help ensure survivors are able to escape unsafe circumstances together with their companion animals.

By enacting HB 5125, Rhode Island has the opportunity to protect companion animals, help domestic violence survivors, and save the courts time and resources by establishing clear statutory permission to award custody to a survivor as part of a protective order. We encourage the advancement of this important legislation in the legislative process.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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ⁱ "The Link Between Cruelty to Animals and Violence Toward Humans," **Animal Legal Defense Fund** <<https://aldf.org/article/the-link-between-cruelty-to-animals-and-violence-toward-humans/>>; "Women with pets more likely to endure domestic abuse, study finds," **CBC News** (2017) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/women-with-pets-more-likely-to-endure-domestic-abuse-study-finds-1.4151113>; **National Link Coalition** <<http://nationallinkcoalition.org>>.

ⁱⁱ "Domestic Violence and Pets," **Red Rover** <<https://redrover.org/domestic-violence-and-pets/>>; "Pets and Domestic Violence," **National Coalition Against Domestic Violence** <<http://www.hope-eci.org/documents/petsanddv.pdf>>.