



April 22, 2025

Dear Chair Craven and Members of the Committee,

My name is Vanessa Volz and I am the President and CEO of Sojourner House, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking in the state of Rhode Island.

I'm writing today in strong support of House Bill 5125, which would allow judges in family court to award custody of pets to the plaintiff in domestic abuse cases.

At Sojourner House, we know that there are many barriers that exist when it comes to leaving an abusive relationship; including fear, money, children, and even pets. Many victims are unable to escape abusive situations because they worry about what will happen to their pet should they leave.

According to a nationwide survey conducted by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 97% of domestic violence survivors say that keeping pets with them is an important factor in deciding whether or not to seek shelter; and half say that they would not consider shelter for themselves without their pet.

In this same survey, 48% of domestic violence survivors said they were worried that their abusive partner would harm or kill their pets; 37% said that their abusive partner had already threatened to harm or kill their pets; and 29% said that their pets had already been harmed or killed.

The overlap between animal cruelty and domestic violence is clear and well-documented. My team and I see the reality of this data every day.

My own dog, Riley— a small, timid, shih tzu with an adorable overbite— was surrendered by a Sojourner House client in 2012. Riley's owner had fled her abuser and come to Sojourner House looking for shelter. Her abuser had been physically violent to both her and Riley in the past, so she brought Riley with her, afraid of what her partner would do if she left the dog at home. Riley's owner couldn't financially care for him at the time, so I offered to foster the dog, and with her owner's encouragement, ended up adopting him.

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While the outcome of this story is unique, the abuse experienced is not. At Sojourner House, we've heard countless clients describe the ways that their abusers manipulated and controlled them by harming or threatening to harm their pets.

Currently, even if a victim goes through the family court process in Rhode Island and is given custody of their children and an order of protection, they would still have to file a separate petition to get custody of their pets.

By allowing family court the option to also grant custody of pets to the plaintiff in these same domestic violence proceedings, we'd be:

- Lowering the risk of injury to the animal by eliminating the wait time between hearings
- Reducing the cost of legal services paid for by the victim or by the state
- Protecting the victim from further manipulation, reducing the likelihood that they will return to an abusive situation

Overall, this legislation would help our state to reduce costs, prevent further violence, and create a more just and streamlined legal system for victims.

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at vvolz@sojournerri.org.

Warmly,
Vanessa Volz

President and CEO

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