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Crossroads Rhode Island

Family Service of Rhode Island

McAuley Ministries –
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Progreso Latino

YWCA Rhode Island

To: Representative Robert Craven, Chair of the House Judiciary Committee
Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee

From: Lucy Rios, Executive Director
RI Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Date: April 22, 2025

Re: **Concerns Regarding House Bill 5669; Request for Amendments to the Bill**

On behalf of our network of member agencies and SOAR, a taskforce of domestic abuse survivors, the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) appreciates this opportunity to express our **concerns and request for amendments regarding House Bill 5669**. This legislation would add animal cruelty offenses to the domestic violence crimes enumerated in the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, RIGL 12-29-2. While we appreciate that this legislation recognizes the significant correlation between animal cruelty and domestic violence, we have concerns about the broad potential for unintended consequences for survivors of domestic violence that could result from the passage of this bill as currently written, including abuse survivors themselves being criminalized by abusers who weaponize the criminal system against them.

We appreciate the sponsor's concern for the often co-occurring risk of domestic violence and animal abuse within an abusive relationship. We would respectfully recommend that, rather than adding additional criminal enhancements in this area, instead the civil protective order statutes are a place that could benefit from increased protections for domestic violence survivors and their pets. Currently, domestic violence survivors can gain protection for their pets in Family Court within a restraining order, but they have no such option to protect pets in the District Court in Rhode Island. This gap in protection means that if a victim happens to be married, formerly married, or has a child in common with the perpetrator they can add pets to their Family Court protective order, but if they happen to be unmarried dating partners or co-habitants only, they cannot seek this important civil remedy for their pets in District Court.

We would appreciate the opportunity to work with the sponsor and this committee to close this gap in civil protection for abuse survivors and their beloved household pets, and we are confident that the unintended consequences for survivors and risk of criminalization and a negative criminal history for abuse victims would be significantly mitigated with this pivot in focus on legal reforms to prevent co-occurring domestic violence and animal cruelty.

To accomplish this goal of closing the civil restraining order pet-protection gap for survivors, RIGL § 8-8.1-3, the District Court protective order statute, could be amended with the following language, to match the language that already exists in the Family Court civil protective order law (RIGL § 15-15-3): “...and further providing in the order for the safety and welfare of all household animals and pets.”

According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 65 percent of domestic violence victims are unable to escape abusive situations because they're concerned about what will happen to their pets. Because the current language of this bill defines animal abandonment as an enumerated domestic violence crime, this has the potential to further deter survivors from leaving dangerous situations for fear of facing serious criminal charges if they are forced to leave their pets in a dangerous household when fleeing an abusive partner.

People who use violence against their partners are often able to use their power to successfully weaponize systems and exploit well-intentioned laws to pursue criminal charges and allegations against their victims in retaliation. We have concerns that the current language of this bill could wrongfully ensnare domestic violence survivors in the criminal system, creating serious and long-term consequences for a survivor's ability to find or sustain employment, housing, or access to their children, with such a criminal record. This risk could be even greater for survivors of color who face disparities in victimization and in legal system responses. Rhode Island's existing animal cruelty statutes subject those found guilty of a first offense of animal cruelty to imprisonment up to 11 months, a fine of \$50.00 - \$500, or both, with a malicious injury or death provision expanding the penalty to 5 years possible imprisonment or a fine of \$1,000.¹

The relationship between animal cruelty and domestic violence must be taken seriously. We appreciate the sponsor's work to promote public understanding of this link, and we want to be sure that any legislation passed to reduce violence in a household also acknowledges the lived experiences of domestic violence survivors. For this reason, we would urge amendments to this bill to focus on closing the gaps in the civil protective order laws to further protect survivors and their pets, rather than adding additional serious criminal penalties and enhancements to RIGL 12-29, which could unintentionally cause long lasting harm to victims of domestic violence.

The unintended consequences of the current version of this bill could risk negatively impacting the survivors that the Domestic Violence Prevention Act was enacted to protect. **Therefore, we urge the committee to amend this proposed legislation to focus on improving the civil protective order laws regarding pet and survivor safety.**

Thank you very much for your consideration of our testimony.

¹ RI Gen. Laws, 1956, § 4-1-1 - 43