



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 5669 – sponsored by Representative O'Brien– which looks to expand the definition of domestic violence to include acts of cruelty committed to a pet owned or cared for by a household member.

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, 48% of domestic violence survivors were worried that their abusive partner would harm or kill their pets; 37% reported that their abusive partner had already threatened to harm or kill their pets; and 29% said 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.

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. To us, it's unequivocally clear these acts of cruelty are acts of domestic violence. It's time that the courts recognized them as such.

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Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at [vvolz@sojournerri.org](mailto:vvolz@sojournerri.org).

Warmly,  
Vanessa Volz

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vanessa Volz', is positioned below the typed name.

President and CEO

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