



**PET INDUSTRY JOINT
ADVISORY COUNCIL**
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**TESTIMONY TO THE RHODE ISLAND HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE IN OPPOSITION TO HB 5040 FROM THE PET
INDUSTRY JOINT ADVISORY COUNCIL (PIJAC)**

ON 9 FEBRUARY 2021

Position: Opposed

The Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC) appreciates the opportunity to offer our views and expertise on addressing animal welfare through legislation. Animal welfare is a very broad subject, so we have limited our testimony today to those most often proposed subjects and look forward to more comprehensive and broader ranging discussions in the future.

As the advocacy voice of the responsible pet care community, PIJAC represents the experience and expertise of retailers, companion animal suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, pet owners and others involved in the many aspects of pet care throughout the state of Rhode Island and across the United States. Our association works to promote animal well-being and responsible pet ownership, foster environmental stewardship, and ensure the availability of healthy pets, as we routinely through our work with governmental agencies at the state and federal levels--including the United States Department of Agriculture, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.--and PIJAC regularly advocates on legislative and regulatory proposals to advance the public interest and of protecting public health and the health, and safety, health and availability of companion animals.

All of us in the responsible pet care community don't just care about animals, we provide care for them on a daily basis—and are dedicated to ensuring that appropriate care of animals is the primary focus of any law or regulation. As such, we offer an unmatched depth and breadth of experience on legislative efforts to verify and certify the health and well-being of pets from the time they are born all the way until they are taken home and made a part of families.

Animal abuser registries can be an important tool to help law enforcement and the pet care community identify and keep convicted felons from harming animals again. We know that animal abuse often accompanies or is a precursor to domestic violence, making it even more important to identify and stop people who hurt defenseless animals. This association with violence against humans means that how such registries are enforced is of vital importance—because some methods force innocent store employees or shelter volunteers into potential confrontation with a proven criminal who could cause severe harm to them or others if provoked.

PIJAC opposes legislation establishing an abuser registry if it includes a point-of-sale verification enforcement mechanism that requires retail pet store employees and animal shelter volunteers to check if customers are listed as animal abusers before processing a pet adoption. If the customer is on the registry, the store or shelter would be responsible for turning away these individuals—or they could face fines or legal prosecution. This is a frightening prospect that puts the personal safety of the employee or volunteer at risk, as those whose names will appear on the registry have already been found guilty of a violent crime.

Numerous studies have concluded that there is a significant correlation between cruelty to animals and violence against other people:

- Animal abusers are five times as likely to harm a person
- Reoffending rates of animal abusers is almost 100 percent
- 60 percent of child abuse cases also had animals in the home that had been abused
- Animal abuse is often the first point of intervention for domestic violence
- More than 50 percent of battered women report their abuser also abused their animal companions

Retail employees and shelter volunteers—many of whom are young and working at their first job, or are retirees supplementing their income—are not trained to handle conflicts nor do they carry the authority of being a law enforcement professional. Situations can easily escalate in a manner similar to those confrontations that have occurred in retail environments regarding mask requirements during the coronavirus pandemic.

In order to ensure the safety and well-being of pet store employees and shelter volunteers who could be put in harm's way by confronting felons with a history of violence, it is critical that point-of-sale verification NOT be included in abuser registry legislation. The enforcement of animal abuser registries should be left to law enforcement professionals who are trained to successfully handle conflicts and situations that could turn violent. More effective ways to enforce animal abuser registries, without endangering innocent store employees or shelter volunteers, include:

- Requiring states to regularly follow up with the abusers on the registry, providing law enforcement the opportunity to expertly identify and appropriately punish cases of abuse.
- Having the state frequently distribute the names and pictures of registry offenders to stores and shelters to share with employees and volunteers, who would be instructed to contact authorities if they see someone on the list attempting to obtain a pet.
- Establishing a federal abuser database maintained by the federal government using the statistics that the FBI already tracks. This national focus would also prevent convicted animal abusers from moving out of the jurisdiction to avoid being listed.

We at the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council would be happy to work with the bill sponsor and other stakeholders to find language that can advance animal welfare without putting Rhode island residents at risk.

Please do what is best for Rhode Island consumers, companion animal owners, and businesses by declining to take action on House Bill 5040.

Thank you for your consideration,

Robert Likins
Vice President of Government Affairs
Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC)