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Governor's signature would mandate cross-reporting of animal, child abuse

Cook County Sheriff's Office, Best Friends Animal Society laud bill's passage as step toward protecting animals, people

A bill that calls for the cross-reporting of most incidents of animal and child abuse has passed both houses of the Illinois legislature and, according to experts, if signed into law would clear the way for a dramatic reduction in violence toward animals and children.

The Cook County Sheriff's Office and Utah-based Best Friends Animal Society worked together to pass the bill, which requires cross-reporting by animal control officers/humane organizations and children's/family services personnel when there are suspected incidents of child or animal neglect.

Best Friends, one of the nation's foremost animal welfare organizations, supports a number of programs in Illinois that advocate a time when there are no more homeless or abused animals, including Safe Humane Chicago, a grass-roots alliance group that works to reduce animal abuse in the metropolitan area through educational programs with Chicago schools and faith-based organizations.

Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, who served in the Illinois House in 2003 when a similar bill was being discussed, said the measure would provide special protection for people and animals in various kinds of abuse cases.

"With all the issues the General Assembly is dealing with, I couldn't be happier that they recognized the importance of passing this bill," Dart said. "The connection between different types of abuse is unquestioned, so empowering front-line workers to report suspected abuse—whether it's against children or animals—will save lives."

The link between animal abuse and child abuse is well documented. Animals are frequently used as pawns in family violence situations. Indeed, a 1983 study revealed that animals were abused in 88 percent of families in which children were abused. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence conducted a survey which included battered women and children's shelters and children's counseling programs. Eighty-five percent of the women and 63 percent of the children who went to domestic violence shelters reported incidents of pet abuse.

"Bests Friends Animal Society is proud to work with the Cook County Sheriff's Office to make all of Illinois safe and humane for children and animals," said Ledy VanKavage, legislative analyst for Best Friends. "It's common knowledge that when there is animal abuse, there's a possibility that there could be other abuse taking place. Abusers often use the threat of harm to an animal to keep other types of cruelty silent."

Another aspect of the bill is that the Department of Children and Family Services may not discipline an investigation specialist, intact family specialist, or a placement specialist for failing to report animal abuse if the specialist determines that making such a report would interfere with the performance of child welfare protection duties.

Senator Don Harmon (D) (39th District) sponsored the Senate version (SB0090) of the bill, while Representative Susana Mendoza (D) (1st District), sponsored the House version (HB0562).

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