



FACT SHEET - H. 626, An Act Related to Animal Welfare

What is the current state of animal cruelty response in Vermont and what does H. 626 do to improve animal welfare and ensure public safety?

- H. 626 would authorize a new position of Director of Animal Welfare within the Department of Public Safety (DPS) to oversee and support animal cruelty investigations statewide, consolidating resources and streamlining response protocols. Because the animal cruelty statutes are located within Vermont's criminal code, and law enforcement officials already have the training and authority to enforce these laws, it makes most sense for the new Division to be part of DPS.
- There is a critical need for state oversight of rescue groups and shelters. Despite handling and housing thousands of animals a year while also interacting with staff, volunteers, and the general public, these agencies are not held to any animal health and welfare or public health standards. The bill amends and creates best practice standards for the operation of animal shelters and animal rescue organizations in Vermont and creates an enforcement mechanism within the newly created Division to ensure compliance.
- The unregulated importation of companion animals into Vermont poses health, financial, physical, and emotional risks to Vermonters. It also contributes to animal neglect and suffering.

A recent analysis by the Vermont Department of Public Safety revealed *"a very fragmented and ineffective system for ensuring the humane and proper treatment of animals and the protection of the health and safety of Vermonters. Functions and duties are fragmented, some statutory language is outdated or no longer applicable, and some functions are not carried out at all. The buck really stops with no one person or agency."* (Act 147 Report, VDPS) The report recommended that animal welfare functions across State government be coordinated in a new Division of Animal Welfare.

This bill creates a licensing and enforcement structure within the Division to regulate the importation and quarantine of animals transported into Vermont for adoption in order to protect animals and ensure public safety.

Who would have authority to investigate complaints of animal cruelty under the new system? Does this bill change Vermont's animal cruelty law?

- The Director of Animal Welfare would have new authority to investigate complaints in a lead or support role.
- Law enforcement officers (local, county, and state) and animal control officers employed by law enforcement agencies would retain their current authority to enforce the animal cruelty statute.
- Private animal shelter agents and municipal animal control officers would be moved from a lead role in investigating cases into a supporting role, working in concert with law enforcement to provide animal husbandry and animal handling expertise.
- The bill does not change what constitutes animal cruelty or the related penalties defined in Title 13, Chapter 8 (Vermont's criminal code).

What would be the main responsibilities of the new Animal Welfare Director?

- Monitor and identify deficiencies in Vermont's system of responding to animal cruelty complaints.
- Ensure investigations are systematic and documented, as well as develop standard operating procedures, guidance forms, and training.
- Develop a plan to house and care for seized animals, who currently don't have a process or dedicated facility to take care of their needs for the duration of the criminal case.
- Work closely with a newly created and diverse Animal Welfare Advisory Council which will advise on matters pertaining to animal welfare.

What other responsibilities besides animal cruelty investigations will be new and which will be transferred to the new Division from other state agencies?

Function	Current State Authority	Proposed State Authority
Create centralized support network for local animal cruelty investigations & housing for seized animals	n/a	Division of Animal Welfare
Oversee annual inspections & licensing of animal shelters & rescue organizations	n/a; formerly enforced by Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFMM)	Division of Animal Welfare
Oversee permitting and enforcement of pet dealer law	Municipal animal control officers, law enforcement officers, VAAFMM	Division of Animal Welfare
Oversee licensing and inspection of pet shops	VAAFMM	Division of Animal Welfare
Oversee licensing, inspection, record-keeping, and quarantine protocols for imported animals	n/a; Vermont requires only a valid health certificate to import an animal ; there are no quarantine requirements or minimum animal care standards	Division of Animal Welfare

Why do we need to create this Division and how will it be funded?

- While the development of this specialized Division will require funding, this bill also aims to streamline the responsibilities of state government so that resources are spent more wisely. Currently, animal cruelty response differs widely from town to town and is ultimately the responsibility of each town’s local government and law enforcement authority.
- Response to a large-scale animal cruelty case could bankrupt a municipality or local animal welfare organization. By investing resources in a more streamlined approach to animal welfare complaints, we hope to prevent these expensive situations from getting out of hand, and more importantly, we hope to be able to respond more quickly and efficiently to complaints in order to remove animals from harm’s way.
- The bill proposes several funding mechanisms, including an animal welfare surcharge assessed on commercial feed products, appropriations made by the General Assembly, and private donations.

SUPPORT H. 626

Better for Animals

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As Baby Goats Died in Charlotte, Residents Seeking Help Hit Roadblocks

VTDigger, February 6, 2023

"The neighbors reported witnessing baby goats dying on a farm in the center of Charlotte last summer. The kids' screams were heard next door, and neighbors said they could see carcasses from their property. Yet while the animals' plight was in full public view, neighbors said getting officials to respond in a timely manner proved a frustrating task that resulted in more goat deaths—and exposed a deficient state system for reporting concerns of animal neglect."

Locals Seek Support in Handling Animal Welfare

Addison Independent, October 5, 2023

"When around 30 cats were left in Monkton's Morse Park this past April, residents quickly sprang into action to rescue the abandoned animals. Over the next several months, community members worked to rehabilitate and rehome many of the cats but struggled to find resources to get help handling the situation. 'Right now, if you have a cruelty case, and you have to confiscate animals, there's nowhere to put them. You have to find someone with a nonprofit rescue, shelter or sanctuary. These animals have to stay where they are until you find somewhere to put them.'"

Vermont's Unregulated Pet Rescues Lead to Patchwork in Animal Care

WCAX, December 7, 2023

"Vermonters love their pets and have a strong record of adopting rescued or abandoned animals from shelters. Most shelters in Vermont operate with high standards of care, making sure dogs and cats are well-nourished, have veterinary care, and in most cases are spayed or neutered. But you might be surprised to know there are actually no state laws governing the operation of shelters and rescue operations—or limiting the flow of pets into the state, and critics say that can lead to some animals not getting the care they need."

Tunbridge Animal Rescue Forced to Forfeit Abused Animals

Bennington Banner, January 2, 2024

"Vermont State Police seized the animals from the nonprofit rescue facility near Montpelier in 2022 after a volunteer who worked at the facility reported the abuse of the animals to authorities. Most of the animals were malnourished, and several needed medical care, including one horse with a seriously neglected eye infection. Several of the animals did not survive."

"In the State of Vermont, filling out a form is all that is required for opening a rescue facility like Hoofbeats and Dreams and becoming a nonprofit. According to Jen Straub, founder and executive director of Dorset Equine Rescue, there is virtually zero oversight or guidance on treating animals unless serious cruelty issues can be substantiated."

"'I would like to think this case has brought awareness and increased people's interest in issues like this,' said Vermont State Trooper Stacia Geno, who handled the case. 'I think there's now a lot of eyes watching these animal cases. There needs to be more regulation on who can become a rescue and oversight on what happens there so we don't see cases like this anymore here in Vermont.'"