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TESTIMONY ON MICHIGAN S.B. 603/604
Presented by Vicki Deisner, Midwest Legislative Director
Before the Michigan Senate Judiciary Committee
Tuesday, October 15, 2013

Chairman Jones, Majority Vice-Chair Schuitmaker, Minority Vice-Chair Bieda and distinguished members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, I am Vicki Deisner, the Midwest Legislative Director for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). The ASPCA, founded in 1866, is the first humane organization established in the Americas and serves as the nation's leading voice for animal welfare. The ASPCA's mission is to provide effective means for the prevention of cruelty to animals throughout the United States. As part of our national effort to assist local anti-cruelty efforts on the ground the ASPCA provides grants to local communities. In fact, over the last several years we have awarded over $600,000 to communities throughout Michigan. On behalf of our approximately 2.5 million members and supporters, including over 73,000 Michigan citizens, we **respectfully urge the Senate Judiciary Committee to vote YES on S.B. 603/604 – a set of bills that would allow animal shelters to obtain criminal records of animal abuse from the state of Michigan without a fee, and allow animal shelters to consider criminal records of animal abuse when deciding whether to allow an individual to adopt an animal.**

Many states have demanded greater protections for animals in our communities by passing legislation to extend felony penalties to acts of cruelty; to establish bonding and forfeiture requirements in order to assist municipal shelters in caring for animals seized from cruelty situations during court proceedings; and to restrict convicted animal abusers from owning pets in the future. These kinds of protections help state and local criminal justice systems deal with abusers and prevent future animal and human abuse – these kinds of protections help strengthen our communities. An important step to assure that Michigan is creating a strong state and local criminal justice system to deal with abusers is to provide animal shelters criminal records of animal abusers, and allow those shelters to consider this information in the adoption process. It is critical that we do not allow animals that have been brought to shelters to either find their owners or be rehomed to end up in the hands of animal abusers who will torture and kill them.

Greater protections for animals in our communities will also help reduce violence to people as there is a strong link between violence to people and violence to animals. Deliberate and brutal abuse of companion animals rarely occurs in isolated instances. A growing body of research demonstrates the undeniable link between those who are cruel to animals and violent toward humans. Animal abuse is often part of a vicious cycle of violence that often escalates to human abuse. Prosecuting and convicting animal abusers is the first step toward a humane society, but we must have laws in place to reduce the potential harm to animals including denying adoptions of homeless animals to individuals with criminal records of animal abuse.

National law enforcement agencies in the U.S. recognize how animal abuse affects crimes of interpersonal violence. The International Association of Chiefs of Police wrote:

"Over the last decade, social scientists and law enforcement agencies have begun to examine cruelty to animals as a serious humane problem closely linked to domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and other violent crimes. Preventing animal abuse cannot undo generations of abuse, but can be an effective means of breaking the cycle of family violence from one generation to the next."

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Violence against animals is a key indicator in assessing potential perpetrators of violent crime. In a 2001 report of animal cruelty cases, out of 1,677 cases of intentional animal cruelty, 21% involved some form of family violence (13% domestic violence, 7% child abuse, 1% elder abuse). Animal abuse rarely occurs in isolation. A 2007 Texas study showed that batterers who harm animals were found to be more dangerous and to use more forms of violence and controlling behaviors than batterers who do not abuse pets (sexual violence, marital rape, emotional violence and stalking). Simmons & Lehmann (2007) Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Vol. 22, No. 9, p. 1211-1222.

One easy way to reduce violence against animals and the potential risk of human violence that often follows, is to provide animal shelters the ability to obtain free of charge criminal records of animal abuse from the state of Michigan, and then allow those shelters to consider criminal records of animal abuse when deciding whether to allow an individual to adopt an animal.

For all of the aforementioned reasons, **the ASPCA respectfully urges the Senate Judiciary Committee to support S.B. 603/604, a set of bills that would allow animal shelters to obtain criminal records of animal abuse from the state of Michigan without a fee, and allow animal shelters to consider criminal records of animal abuse when deciding whether to allow an individual to adopt an animal.**

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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