SB 97: Pet Protection Order Testimony

Thank you Senator Carpenter and the Committee for this opportunity to speak today. My name is Crystal Hester. I'm a Masters of Social Work student at George Williams College in Williams Bay, WI. I am also a student intern with the National Association of Social Workers-Wisconsin Chapter. In addition, I have an extensive background working one-on-one with victims and families of domestic violence.

Recently, NASW's Legislative Social Policy Committee voted in support of SB 97. As social workers, we understand and witness in the field the link between animal abuse and domestic violence. Yet, we do not always hold the authority to do something about it. One study reported that animal abuse coincided with violent outbursts against human family members 51% of the time. To many who are pet owners, a family pet is considered a member of the family and this can make it particularly traumatizing to witness. Under current law though, a family pet is not viewed as a family member but is rather seen as "property," which adds another barrier to victims in the courtroom.

When a victim of domestic violence files a restraining order he or she is faced with many difficult decisions. Does he or she leave the household knowing that their pet is not safe? Between 18% and 48% of battered women delay their decision to leave, or return to their abuser, out of fear for the welfare of their pets. In a worst case scenario, which social workers know happens all too often, the abuser may choose to neglect, injure or kill the animal as a form of revenge, use the animal as a form of leverage or make threats to the animal in order to exploit anxiety or fear in the victim. One study indicated that 87% of batterer-perpetrated pet abuse was committed in the presence of their partners for the purpose of revenge or control. The
cycle of violence shows us that this experience may happen over and over again, making it traumatizing for the victim.

According to one study, as many as **71% of victims in women’s shelters report that their abuser harmed, killed or threatened family pets**. One would never knowingly leave their child or another family member in a dangerous situation, so why should he or she be forced to leave their pet? Knowingly leaving a pet in the care of an abuser can create an additional trauma on top of an already traumatic experience. It is evident that a household filled with violence does not only threaten one member, but all members. In these difficult situations, victims deserve to feel that they and their families, pets included, are protected and safe under the law, not vulnerable and insecure.

For these reasons, NASW-WI is in full support of SB 97. So far, **28 states have passed similar legislation**. Including animals in protective orders will help to remove one barrier that prevents victims from seeking safety. At least **53 domestic violence shelters in Wisconsin** are believed to have established collaborative partnerships with local animal groups to provide safe housing foster care for pets, allowing victims the peace of mind to focus on recovery. The passage of this bill could serve to influence others areas of our State to do the same. We urge you as legislators to support SB 97 and to make Wisconsin the next state to carry the banner for victims of domestic violence and their pets. Thank you to the Committee for this opportunity to speak and to Sen. Carpenter for your continued leadership.