

Bill Number: HB1537

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WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF APRIL DOHERTY
IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 1537
HUMANE SOCIETY AND ANIMAL CONTROL OFFICERS—EDUCATION AND
TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

I write in support of House Bill 1537 Humane Society and Animal Control Officers—Education and Training Requirements. This Bill is essential in providing a foundation of education, as well as continuing education for an officer of a humane society and an animal control officer (hereinafter “HSO/ACO”). HB1537 is important as many HSO/ACOs are investigating crimes against animals, including misdemeanors, felonies, and civil citations. Furthermore, by having a fundamental education, they will also be able to recognize and cross-report crimes of family violence that may be co-occurring and observed during investigations.

Before a police officer graduates into field training, there is a rigorous course schedule to prepare them for patrol. This Bill establishes similar guidelines for HSO/ACOs. While HSO/ACOs are typically unarmed, they are tasked with similar duties of investigation for a variety of incidents and crimes.

A baseline criminal law education requirement would ensure that officers are well versed in 4th Amendment searches and seizures, chain of custody procedures for evidence, and interviewing techniques. These are potential areas where issues may arise with an untrained HSO/ACO that the prosecutor may have to address with the Court.

Some states, including Texas, Michigan, and Virginia, to name a few, already require mandatory training and continuing education for their HSO/ACOs. Virginia specifically requires the education, along with training to recognize child abuse and neglect. The Virginia HSO/ACOs work very closely with the Virginia Attorney General's Animal Law Unit, where over 1,450 matters have been recorded in reference to animal abuse.

As of October 1, 2017, Maryland became a mandatory reporting state requiring veterinarians to report suspected animal abuse. As more veterinarians report their suspicions, the HSO/ACOs must be prepared to complete reports, as well as package any evidence that may be necessary for the investigation.

Continuing education requirements provide for the advancement of skills in the field, to be informed of the most recent and up-to-date information, and also issues or challenges that others may be experiencing.

In 2016, the FBI began recording data through NIBRS (National Incident-Based Reporting System) animal abuse, deemed a “crime against society.” This is essential for animal control officers to be familiar with as the data must be reported by police agencies. Many animal control officers are under different agencies, and it is essential for the relationships to be established between HSO/ACOs and law enforcement. This can be supported through this Bill’s education requirements.

I urge a favorable report of House Bill 1537.