

BILL NO: House Bill 0089
TITLE: Criminal Law - Crimes Relating to Animals - Conviction and Sentencing
COMMITTEE: Judiciary
HEARING DATE: January 23, 2025
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

HB0089 is a necessary legislative measure to further protect animals from abuse and cruelty. By establishing that each animal harmed in violation of a prohibition against animal cruelty constitutes a separate offense and individual victim, the bill sends a clear message that animals, like all victims of abuse, are deserving of legal protection in their own right. This provision recognizes that the harm done to each animal is an independent act of cruelty, rather than treating multiple victims as one, which strengthens the legal framework for prosecuting offenders.

Maryland is increasingly recognizing the importance of victim rights, and HB0089 is consistent with broader national trends toward strengthening legal protections for animals. As a victim services leader, we are cognizant of the research that shows a well-documented link that animal cruelty is a predictive or co-occurring crime with violence against humans (including intimate partners, children, and elders) and is associated with other types of violent offenses. Increased awareness of this linkage and a collaborative approach to these investigations strengthens the identification and reduction of such crimes.

Seventy-five percent of abused women who have companion animals report a history of their pets being threatened or intentionally harmed by their intimate partner, with children being present and witnessing the violence over ninety percent of the time. Companion animals can be a source of comfort to victims of domestic abuse, however abusers often exploit this bond by threatening to hurt or kill beloved animals. Animal cruelty may be used to convince human victims to return to a violent relationship, isolate and financially control the victim, or coerce the victim into staying. Because most shelters do not accept animals, more often than not, abused partners will choose to stay in the violent situation out of concern for their pet's safety.

By mandating the stacking of sentences for each individual animal harmed, HB0089 both enhances the deterrence effect for individuals contemplating animal cruelty and breaks the cycle of escalation before human victims are similarly harmed. If an individual knows that harming multiple animals will lead to significantly harsher penalties, they should be less likely to engage in such conduct. Our current legal framework may result in sentences that fail to reflect the full scope of the harm caused by cruelty toward multiple animals, while this bill ensures that offenders who commit heinous acts involving multiple victims face consequences that truly reflect the extent of their crimes. By ensuring that each animal harmed is treated as an individual victim and that sentences for these crimes reflect the full scope of the harm caused, HB0089 advances the cause of animal welfare while reinforcing the principles of justice, deterrence, and proportionality in criminal sentencing.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a private, non-profit, legal services organization that serves as a leading voice for justice and fairness for women. It advocates for the rights of women through legal assistance to individuals and strategic initiatives to achieve systemic change, working to ensure physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy for women in Maryland.