

March 20, 2026

Testimony in Support of HB 564

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee.

My name is Nikki Pickens, and I am here today on behalf of myself and many other Maryland families whose trust was deeply violated.

On February 7, 2025, my beloved cat, Norby, passed away. Like many families, we chose cremation so he could come home to us with dignity. That never happened.

Instead of cremains, families were given bags containing sand, cement, fertilizer, and in some cases teeth, zip ties and construction screws were found.

At least 39 deceased pets were discovered abandoned—left in the back of a hearse and on the side of the road. Many more have still not been found and returned to their families, because we do not know where he discarded their bodies. To this day, 21 pets remain unclaimed in a freezer at animal control.

The individual responsible was unlicensed and not certified to operate or own a crematory. They have since pleaded guilty and face up to 25 years in prison. However, the charges are for theft and malicious destruction of property—because in Maryland, our pets are still legally considered property, not family.

In response, I created a Facebook support group for over 80 victims—a place to grieve, to seek answers, and to not feel alone. Losing a pet is already heartbreaking. But living with the uncertainty of what happened to their bodies after placing trust in someone's care is devastating beyond words.

Our pets are not “just animals.” They are family. They provide unconditional love, emotional support, and for many, they are their only companion. Treating them as mere property minimizes the deep bond we share and the trauma caused when that bond is broken.

House Bill 564 is necessary to ensure accountability, protect grieving families, and prevent this from ever happening again.

I respectfully ask that you be in favor of this bill so no other family has to endure this pain.