

Statement by Gina Covell, Humane Agent and Owner of Spring Hill Rescue
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As a founder of a nonprofit animal welfare organization for over 20 years, I responded to and investigated hundreds of complaints of potential animal cruelty in Vermont. At the time, Spring Hill Horse Rescue was the only organization that could facilitate equines and other livestock AND provided Vermont's first humane agents that specialized in large animal cruelty investigations. We provided, free of charge, this service to the entire state of Vermont working in concert with each county's humane society. We helped to create the Vermont Animal Cruelty Task Force and developed the only large animal cruelty training course for Vermont's law enforcement, animal control officers and humane agents. We also created Vermont's first and only Hay Bank through the Vermont Humane Federation.

From the beginning, it was clear that large animal cruelty complaints had been severely neglected for a very long time. And now, sadly, after over 20 years of serving Vermont, Spring Hill is no longer investigating animal cruelty. As one of the very few people in Vermont with extensive operational and hands-on experience I can say with confidence that the only common-sense solution to provide rapid, professional, reliable, and safe response to complaints of animal cruelty and when necessary, the seizure of those animals in eminent danger is a state funded facility and law enforcement agency like the SPCA. Here are my experiences and over 20 years of collective knowledge to support why I feel Vermont needs a dedicated agency to handle crimes of animal cruelty rather than depending on volunteers and non-profit organizations.

1. Animal cruelty is a crime. It is also a crime that has been linked to other crimes like domestic violence, child abuse and neglect and serial killers. Most law enforcement officers are not properly educated about Vermont State Animal Cruelty Laws and more importantly have sparse knowledge of all animals and their care in general. Law enforcement must rely on other experts or professionals to properly investigate a complaint, therefore their time was mainly spent facilitating site checks, paperwork etc.
2. Per Vermont State Statutes, any law enforcement action taken regarding livestock must be preapproved by the Department of Agriculture which looked at every situation through the perspective of commercial livestock production, not a domestic or companion animal situation in which the majority of complaints were about. Any bills to create or clarify any laws involving livestock are given to the Livestock Committee, which everyone in the animal welfare profession will say 'go to die'. Even though the Livestock Committee has allowed an animal welfare representative a seat, this has been ineffective. The current system inhibits any ability to enhance animals' wellbeing or provide a clearer understanding of the laws by people that own and care for animals, those that are enforcing the laws, judges, prosecutors, and defendant lawyers.
2. Many animal welfare organizations rely heavily on volunteers. In most cases volunteers are not properly trained to handle the vast variety of animals encountered. In

fact, I found that people with the most experience did not have the time to volunteer as they were too busy caring for their own animals and most of the volunteers had little to no experience but just had a basic love for animals. In the case where animals must be seized, the background, handling, temperaments and previous treatments are unknown and they are generally quite unruly, unsocialized and unhandled. This is a very dangerous situation for volunteers and animals.

3. Humane Agents and volunteers do not have access to data about the people that are going to investigate. They do not know if they have violent backgrounds or are known drug dealers, etc. Many times these people are found to have mental illnesses. Again, a potentially very dangerous situation.

4. Most animal welfare organizations are struggling non-profits who rely on public donations or grants. When animals are seized and placed in their care they are responsible for around the clock care, veterinarian expenses, feed, and housing. One case can literally wipe out an organization's funds and cause them to close for good.

5. The participation from animal welfare organizations is strictly voluntarily. They can, and many have, decide to not help at any given time. The Vermont Humane Federation went so far as to get funding and developed an animal cruelty database. However, I found that some organizations were not properly addressing complaints and some were not addressing them at all in some instances. Some organizations were using veterinarians that were very inappropriate. And with a change of Officers, the Vermont Humane Federation decided to close the entire system with no warning.

6. Liability. All animal welfare organizations and their staff, volunteers and board members are not covered by qualified immunity like law enforcement officers and agencies are. Animal welfare organizations pay thousands of dollars for commercial liability, but it does not prevent them from being sued. In fact, even though Spring Hill nor any of our volunteers have ever filed an insurance claim, our insurance agency would not re-up our policy because they deemed animal cruelty investigations as dangerous activities. We were then black-balled and could not find any companies that would insure us. Since then we are only acting as a sanctuary for the remaining animals in our care.

