

ISSUE BRIEF



SF421—Companion Animal Cruelty

Background

Iowa ranks 49th in the nation for the effectiveness of our animal cruelty laws. Too often we see cases where the penalties don't seem to “fit the crime”, due to lax enforcement, generous plea deals, and weak sentencing. SF421 is the result of lessons learned by law enforcement, prosecutors, and a survey of best practices across the nation.

Improving Iowa's companion animal cruelty laws (Ch 717B) is about more than just increasing penalties.

What SF421 does:

- Improves definitions – especially those related to “injury” and “serious injury”.
- Clarifies distinction between neglect (failure to provide care) and abuse (direct action causing injury).
- Removes exceptions to abuse offense for the owner or a person acting with the consent of the owner.
- Improves definition of minimum standard of care (food, water, shelter, etc.) but does not preclude “barn cats” or “farm dogs” – garages, barns, and sheds are explicitly allowed as shelter.
- Provides for enhanced penalties based on the severity of the injuries sustained by the animal and previous convictions.
- Provides for mental health evaluations and restrictions on future possession by offenders.
- Creates the offense of “animal endangerment” for leaving animals in hot cars and allows law enforcement to rescue animals from hot cars.



Photo: Iowa City Press-Citizen

Improved definitions help prosecutors and judges. Enhancements provide additional options for charging and sentencing.

Much still depends on law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges, but improving the laws will provide better tools for these officials to use to protect animals and help Iowa's communities.

Note this bill would explicitly not impact livestock as livestock cruelty is addressed in another chapter of the Iowa Code (Ch 717). Agricultural interests having nothing to fear from this bill.

Action

Encourage your legislator to improve Iowa's companion animal cruelty laws by supporting SF421 when the bill comes before them.