

New Jersey Considering Animal Cruelty Law Revisions

Violators would face stiffer penalties under the proposal.

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A New Jersey state Assemblyman said he wants to completely restructure the state's animal cruelty laws and stiffen penalties for violators.

Jeff Van Drew, (D-Cape May), said the section of state law that deals with the abuse and mistreatment of animals does not go far enough and needs to be updated and expanded.

New Jersey's animal cruelty laws were established in 1880 and have not kept pace with modern cruelty cases involving dog fighting or using animals to smuggle drugs, Van Drew said, who owns two dogs.

Van Drew is teaming up with state law enforcement officials and animal welfare advocates to gain support for legislation that would overhaul the state's animal cruelty laws for the first time in more than 125 years.

The legislation, A-2649, is nicknamed "Angel's Law" in memory of a South Jersey dog that died after being starved and beaten by its owner. The bill would make inhumane acts against animals specific criminal offenses and significantly increase criminal and civil penalties for violations.

"Atrocities like dog fighting, abandonment and improper euthanization need to be treated like other felonies — with harsh penalties," Van Drew said at a State House press conference.

Van Drew's bill would:

Add a section that addresses hoarding, in which owners take in a large number of animals that they are unable to care for.

Establish penalties for abandoning an animal after taking it to a veterinarian or animal care facility.

Add penalties for those who allow children 16 years old or younger to witness violence against animals.

Establish penalties for the improper euthanization of animals.

Under the bill, penalties would be dramatically strengthened with the most serious crimes drawing first-degree penalties of up to 20 years in jail and \$200,000 in fines.

First-degree offenders would be subject to mandatory mental health counseling, community service, civil penalties, possible forfeiture of all animals owned by that individual and prohibition from ever owning an animal again.

The bill has cleared an Assembly committee, but it has yet to be considered by the full Assembly or state Senate.