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Senator Jennifer Bradley, Representative Lindsay Cross and Representative Berny Jacques File SB 272/HB 297, Appointment of Courtroom Animal Advocates

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. – Today, **Senator Jennifer Bradley (R-Fleming Island)**, **Representative Lindsay Cross (D-St. Petersburg)**, and **Representative Berny Jacques (R-Clearwater)** filed [SB 272](#) and [HB 297](#) for the 2024 Legislative Session.

The bill allows for the discretionary appointment of a volunteer attorney, certified emeritus attorney, or certified legal intern to act as an advocate for the interests of justice in criminal cases of neglect or abuse involving a dog or cat. Laws permitting the appointment of guardians *ad litem* to serve the interests of children and victims are standard, but no such law currently exists in Florida for animals who are similarly unable to advocate for themselves. SB 272/HB 297 would empower the appointed legal advocate to monitor the case, aid in fact-finding, attend hearings, and present recommendations to the court, and would require potential advocates to undergo training prior to appointment.

“This bill is a smart and proactive step in protecting cats and dogs that have been subjected to abuse or neglect. For many of us, our pets are family. However, there continue to be horrific instances of animal mistreatment and neglect in our state. This bill will provide cost-saving tools to our courts and a trusted advocate to represent the interests of justice. I’m proud to work alongside Senator Bradley on this great bill,” said **Representative Lindsay Cross**.

“As an animal lover, I’m pleased to sponsor legislation that allows an advocate to participate in proceeding regarding animal neglect or abuse,” added **Senator Jennifer Bradley**. “These advocates will ensure an informed process and, especially in cases of hoarding, provide helpful resources for the judicial process. I’m proud to support this legislation.”

“As a former prosecutor who has prosecuted animal cruelty cases, I strongly believe this legislation will provide prosecutors with the tools and assistance that they need to seek justice on these important cases,” said **Representative Berny Jacques**.

“The Courtroom Animal Advocate Program will allow for much needed support and assistance to prosecutors and judges in cases of animal cruelty while providing a voice for the animal victims. At the discretion of the presiding judge, the volunteer lawyers will also help alleviate the burden of crowded dockets on both judges and prosecutors by assisting with the animal welfare aspects of each case,” said **Kate MacFall, Florida Senior State**

Director, The Humane Society of the United States.

“The Creation of a Courtroom Animal Advocate Program will offer additional protection against egregious instances of cruelty to dogs and cats in Florida. Court-appointed legal advocates will support the work of prosecutors and judges and help to improve courtroom efficiency while ensuring that the best interests of these animals are being considered in criminal cruelty proceedings,” said **Alicia Prygoski, Strategic Legislative Affairs Manager at the Animal Legal Defense Fund.** “We are grateful to Senator Bradley, Representative Cross, and Representative Jacques for spearheading this important legislation.”

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