

# NY county creating list of animal abusers

By FRANK ELTMAN (AP) – 3 days ago

FARMINGVILLE, N.Y. — You've heard of Megan's Laws, designed to keep sex offenders from striking again. Now there's a law created in the hope of preventing animal abusers from inflicting more cruelty — or moving on to human victims.

Suffolk County, on the eastern half of Long Island, moved to create the nation's first animal abuse registry this week, requiring people convicted of cruelty to animals to register or face jail time and fines.

"We know there is a very strong correlation between animal abuse and domestic violence," said Suffolk County legislator Jon Cooper, the bill's sponsor. "Almost every serial killer starts out by torturing animals, so in a strange sense we could end up protecting the lives of people."

The online list will be open to the public, so that pet owners or the merely curious can find out whether someone living near them is on it. Some animal abusers have been known to steal their neighbors' pets.

Cooper is also pushing legislation that would bar anyone on the registry from buying or adopting a pet from a shelter, pet shop or breeder.

The law was prompted by a number of animal abuse cases in recent months, including that of a Selden woman accused of forcing her children to watch her torture and kill kittens and dozens of dogs, then burying the pets in her backyard.

Animal welfare activists hope the law, passed unanimously Tuesday in the suburban New York City county of 1.5 million people, will inspire governments nationwide in the same way Megan's Law registries for child molesters have proliferated in the past decade.

A spokesman for county Executive Steve Levy said he intends to sign the legislation. It then requires a 30-day review by state officials before it goes on the books.

As Fred Surbito took his Yorkshire terrier, Sasha, in for grooming at a Farmingville pet store this week, he applauded the legislation.

"It's very, very important," he said. "If you don't love an animal, you should not have an animal. An animal is part of your family. Like your children, they should never be neglected or harmed. Anybody that does should never own a pet again."

More than a dozen states have introduced legislation to establish similar registries, but Suffolk County is the first government entity to pass such a law, said Stephan Otto, director of legislative affairs for the Animal Legal Defense Fund.

The Suffolk County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals will administer the database, to be funded by a \$50 fee paid by convicted abusers. All abusers 18 or older must supply authorities with their address, a head-and-shoulders photograph and any aliases. Convicted abusers will remain on the registry for five years. Those failing to register face up to a year in jail and a fine of up to \$1,000.

After the 2009 arrest of Sharon McDonough, accused of burying kittens and as many as 42 dogs in her yard, neighbors whose pets had disappeared feared the worst. But authorities later concluded that McDonough — who is expected in court this month and could get up to two years in prison if convicted — bought the animals or adopted them through shelters or other traditional outlets.

 **Associated Press**

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FILE - In this Nov. 7, 2009 file photo, officers from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals unearth animal remains in the backyard of Sharon McDonough's Selden, N.Y., home in Suffolk County, Long Island, where 42 dead animals were found buried in her yard. On Wednesday, Oct. 13, 2010, the Suffolk County Legislature voted unanimously to create the nation's first animal abuse registry, which would require convicted animal abusers to place their names in an online registry, similar to child abuse registries that have sprung up in the past decade across the country. McDonough is facing charges of aggravated animal cruelty and, if convicted, could be subject to the new law. (AP Photo/Ed Betz, File)



Map





While some abuse is motivated purely by cruelty, Suffolk SPCA Chief Roy Gross said, some recent cases are linked to the poor economy.

For instance, an emaciated Doberman mix was recently found near death inside a foreclosed-on home, he said. And sometimes, pet rescuer Cathy Mulnard said, elderly people on fixed incomes must decide between eating, or feeding their pets.

"They don't mean to be bad to the animal, but they get overwhelmed and don't know how to ask for help. They may be innocent abusers," said Mulnard, a founder and co-director of Second Chance Rescue, a Suffolk animal shelter that works closely with the SPCA.

Mulnard called the legislation "a godsend for the animals."

"We take care of our animals and love our animals the way you do your children," she said. "We need to protect every animal that's out there because they don't make the decisions in their life; human beings do."

*Associated Press researcher Monika Mathur in New York contributed to this report.*

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