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New PAWS legislation proposed for animal welfare services in Ontario

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The Ontario government is expected to pass the new Provincial Animal Welfare (PAWS) Act legislation within the next month or so.

The Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals announced that they will no longer have enforcement and animal welfare investigations in effect in the spring of next year.

The PAWS Act was introduced by Solicitor General and MPP Sylvia Jones last month. If passed, this new legislation will have the harshest and toughest fines for animal abuse in Canada.

?That's an important message to send to people. We have a responsibility to look after our animals, our pets, and if you choose to abuse them or treat them poorly, then you will be charged and dealt with harshly,? explains Jones. ?We feel that it is extremely important to make sure our animals are protected.?

The bill includes a proposal to hire enforcement officers, who would be recognized as provincial employees and will receive consistent and prominent training to ensure that proper charges are laid, and that the officers know what to look for. That was one key factor that the OSPCA struggled with, was accurate and consistent training. Crown attorneys will also be receiving orderly training to get a higher conviction rate.

?One of the frustrations and challenges that many Ontarians saw, was you would see an example of animal abuse, and charged would be laid, but they'd either be thrown out or not proceed. That was partly because there wasn't consistency in the investigation process,? says Jones.

According to the official press release on the Ontario website the PAWS Act would introduce new offences to combat activities, such as dog fighting; give inspectors necessary powers to help animals in distress and to hold owners accountable; give the government the ability to empower others, beyond inspectors, to take action when an animal is in the imminent risk of serious injury or death when a pet is left in a hot car; significantly increase penalties for serious, repeat and corporate offenders; improve oversight and ensure increased transparency and accountability including establishing a one-window complaints mechanism for the public; and help in establishing a multi-disciplinary advisory table made up of a wide range of experts, including veterinarians, agriculture representatives, academics, animal advocates and other to provide ongoing advice to the ministry to improve animal welfare.

She added, ?The general reaction so far has been positive, and I hope to continue that. Part of the reason why we took our time to bring forward the legislation, is because we wanted to consult, and we've done that pretty aggressively. Over 1600 members of the public shared their values and interests in the issue, but we also spoke to veterinarians, agriculture producers, humane societies, municipalities, police, because there is so many players who participate and want to have their voices heard. I'm an optimist today and hoping that the other parliamentarians will support and pass it.?