

EQUINE PARTNER PROTECTION ACT OF 2025

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Executive Summary

Problem:

In Ohio, horses are classified as livestock for most legal purposes. When a sport, lesson, or therapy horse is abused or neglected, prosecutors are often limited to the general cruelty statute, which may not carry the same felony framework, seizure tools, or restitution structure available for companion animals.

Solution:

Recognize a narrow class of horses primarily used in partnership with humans for sport, recreation, lessons, therapy, or instruction as “Equine Partners,” and extend to them the companion-animal cruelty protections, penalties, and enforcement tools.

Method:

Either add Equine Partners to R.C. 959.131 by definition or create a parallel section, R.C. 959.132, that mirrors 959.131 for Equine Partners.

Safeguard:

Preserve traditional agriculture by excluding bona fide production, breeding, or farm-work horses not used primarily in human-equine partnership.

Impact:

Stronger deterrence, clearer charging, faster intervention and rehoming for suffering horses, alignment with modern equestrian reality, minimal fiscal effect.

PART I — PROPOSED DRAFT BILL TEXT

A. Short-Form Amendment to R.C. 959.131 (Companion Animals)

Section 1:

That section 959.131 of the Revised Code be amended to read as follows:

R.C. 959.131 Prohibitions concerning companion animals.

Definitions. As used in this section:

(1) “Companion animal” means any animal that is kept inside a residential dwelling and any dog or cat regardless of where it is kept. “Companion animal” also includes an Equine Partner as defined in division (A)(11) of this section. “Companion animal” does not include livestock or any wild animal.

(11) “Equine Partner” means an equine, including a horse, pony, mule, donkey, or other equid, that is used primarily in human-equine partnership in sport, recreation, lessons, therapy, or instruction, including but not limited to dressage, eventing, jumping, polo, vaulting, endurance riding, therapeutic riding, and racing, and that is boarded, trained, or maintained in this state with a documented human handler or rider partnership.

(B) No person shall knowingly torture, torment, needlessly mutilate or maim, cruelly beat, poison, needlessly kill, or commit an act of cruelty against a companion animal.

(C) No person shall knowingly cause serious physical harm to a companion animal.

(D) No person who confines or who is the custodian or caretaker of a companion animal shall negligently do any of the following:

- (1) Torture, torment, or commit an act of cruelty against the companion animal.
- (2) Deprive the companion animal of necessary sustenance.
- (3) Impound or confine the companion animal without affording it, during the confinement, with access to shelter from heat, cold, wind, rain, snow, or excessive direct sunlight, or otherwise expose it to adverse environmental conditions likely to cause sickness or suffering.

(E) to (G) [Existing penalty and enforcement provisions retained without change and apply to Equine Partners as companion animals.]

(H) Exemptions. Divisions (B), (C), (D), (E), (F), and (G) of this section do not apply to any of the following:

- (1) A companion animal used in scientific research conducted by an organization licensed by the United States Department of Agriculture.
- (2) The lawful practice of veterinary medicine by a person licensed under Chapter 4741. of the Revised Code.
- (3) To (5) [Existing exemptions retained.]
- (6) An equine that is used exclusively in bona fide agricultural production, breeding, or farm-work operations and is not maintained or boarded for human-equine partnership as defined in division (A)(11) of this section.

Section 2:

Existing section 959.131 of the Revised Code is repealed.

Notes:

- This approach inserts Equine Partners into 959.131 to inherit the existing felony scheme, seizure, and restitution.
- Division lettering and cross-references may shift after LSC formatting. Maintain existing definitions in 959.131(A) and add (11).
- Keep livestock exclusion intact, then re-admit Equine Partners by definition; the specific controls the general.

B. Full New Section — R.C. 959.132 (Parallel to Companion Animal Statute)

Section 1:

That sections 959.13 and 959.131 of the Revised Code be amended to include cross-references to a new section and that new section 959.132 of the Revised Code be enacted to read as follows:

R.C. 959.132 Prohibitions concerning Equine Partners.

(A) Definitions. As used in this section:

- (1) “Equine Partner” means an equine, including a horse, pony, mule, donkey, or other equid, that is used primarily in human-equine partnership in sport, recreation, lessons, therapy, or instruction, including but not limited to dressage, eventing, jumping, polo, vaulting, endurance riding, therapeutic riding, and racing, and that is boarded, trained, or maintained in this state with a documented human handler or rider partnership.
- (2) “Custodian” or “caretaker” and “confine” have the same meanings as in section 959.131 of the Revised Code.
- (3) “Serious physical harm to an Equine Partner” means any of the following:
 - (a) Physical harm that carries a substantial risk of death.
 - (b) Physical harm that involves either partial or total permanent incapacity.
 - (c) Physical harm that involves acute pain of a duration that results in substantial suffering, or that involves any degree of prolonged or intractable pain.

(B) No person shall knowingly torture, torment, needlessly mutilate or maim, cruelly beat, poison, needlessly kill, or commit an act of cruelty against an Equine Partner.

(C) No person shall knowingly cause serious physical harm to an Equine Partner.

(D) No person who confines or who is the custodian or caretaker of an Equine Partner shall negligently do any of the following:

- (1) Torture, torment, or commit an act of cruelty against the Equine Partner.
- (2) Deprive the Equine Partner of necessary sustenance.
- (3) Impound or confine the Equine Partner without affording it, during the confinement, with access to shelter from heat, cold, wind, rain, snow, or excessive direct sunlight, or otherwise expose it to adverse environmental conditions likely to cause sickness or suffering.
- (4) Fail to provide necessary and timely veterinary care for an Equine Partner when the caretaker knew or reasonably should have known that the animal was suffering illness, injury, or pain.
- (5) Transport an Equine Partner in a manner that subjects the animal to extreme temperatures, prolonged deprivation of water, overcrowding, or conditions likely to cause injury or suffering.

(E) Penalties. Except as provided in division (F) of this section:

- (1) Whoever violates division (B) of this section is guilty of a misdemeanor of the first degree on a first offense and a felony of the fifth degree on each subsequent offense.
- (2) Whoever violates division (C) of this section, causing serious physical harm to an Equine Partner, is guilty of a felony of the fourth degree on a first offense and a felony of the third degree on each subsequent offense.
- (3) Whoever violates division (D)(1) or (D)(2) of this section is guilty of a misdemeanor of the second degree on a first offense and a misdemeanor of the first degree on each subsequent offense.
- (4) Whoever violates division (D)(3) of this section is guilty of a misdemeanor of the first degree on a first offense and a felony of the fifth degree on each subsequent offense.
- (5) A violation of division (D)(4) is a misdemeanor of the first degree on a first offense and a felony of the fifth degree on each subsequent offense.
- (6) Aggravated Cruelty to an Equine Partner – If the violation of division (B) or (C) of this section is committed knowingly and results in the permanent loss of use of a limb, the loss of an eye, severe lameness, or death of the Equine Partner, the offender is guilty of a felony of the third degree.
- (7) Pattern Offender – If an offender is convicted of two or more violations of this section involving the same Equine Partner within a two-year period, any subsequent violation is a felony of the fourth degree, regardless of the underlying subsection.

(F) Exemptions. This section does not apply to any of the following:

- (1) Scientific research or testing conducted under federal law and regulations.
- (2) The lawful practice of veterinary medicine by a person licensed under Chapter 4741. of the Revised Code.
- (3) An equine used exclusively in bona fide agricultural production, breeding, or farm-work operations and not maintained or boarded for human-equine partnership as defined in division (A)(1) of this section.

(G) Impoundment, forfeiture, and costs. The court, in addition to any other penalty, may order forfeiture of any Equine Partner in the offender's ownership or care, may prohibit or limit future ownership or care of Equine Partners, and shall order the offender to reimburse the impounding agency or custodian for reasonable and necessary costs incurred for the care of the Equine Partner.

The procedures and standards for impoundment, custody, forfeiture, and restitution applicable to companion animals under section 959.131 of the Revised Code apply to Equine Partners under this section.

(H) Rulemaking. The director of agriculture, in consultation with the Ohio livestock care standards board and recognized equine organizations involved in sport, recreation, and therapy, may adopt rules as necessary to implement this section, including species-appropriate shelter and care standards unique to Equine Partners.

- (I) Severability. If any provision of this section or its application to any person or circumstance is held invalid, the invalidity does not affect other provisions or applications of this section that can be given effect without the invalid provision or application. The provisions of this section are severable.

Section 2.

Sections 959.13 and 959.131 of the Revised Code are amended to include references to section 959.132 where appropriate.

Notes:

- This option keeps 959.131 intact and creates a parallel regime with identical penalty tiers and remedies.
- Consider a conforming amendment in 959.13 to clarify concurrent applicability where conduct overlaps.

PART II — SECTION-BY-SECTION EXPLANATION

Definition and Scope:

- “Equine Partner” turns on primary use in human-equine partnership. This is adjudicated by practical indicators: competition records, training or lesson agreements, boarding or therapy contracts, instructor or program attestations, veterinary records reflecting sport or therapy use.
- The carve-out preserves agricultural horses that are not primarily used in partnership activities.

Conduct Covered:

- Mirrors companion-animal cruelty and neglect: active cruelty, serious physical harm, and negligent deprivation of food, water, shelter, and protection from environmental exposure.

Penalties and Remedies:

- Misdemeanor and felony tiers track companion-animal law so prosecutors and judges use a familiar framework.
- Impoundment, forfeiture, ownership bans, and restitution for care costs are expressly authorized.

Exemptions:

- Veterinary care, federally regulated research, and bona fide agricultural use are preserved.
- This is not a blanket reclassification of all equids. It is targeted to horses used primarily for sport, recreation, lessons, or therapy.

Rulemaking Authority:

- Limited rules for species-appropriate standards when needed. Examples: turnout minimums for therapy programs, weather-appropriate shelter for clipped show horses, transport best practices for event horses.

PART III — POLICY RATIONALE AND TALKING POINTS

Ohioans keep horses for sport, lessons, and therapy in true partnership with people. When those horses are abused or neglected, our law treats them like livestock rather than like the partner animals they are, which limits felony charging and timely seizure or rehoming. The Equine Partner Protection Act simply extends the existing companion-animal protections to this narrow class, while preserving agriculture. It updates our law to match modern equestrian reality, improves enforcement, and protects vulnerable animals at minimal cost.

3–5 Minute Talking Points

1. **Modern Use:** Tens of thousands of Ohioans engage in lessons, youth programs, and therapeutic riding. These horses are not agricultural stock; they are partners.
2. **Legal Gap:** Companion-animal law brings felony teeth, seizure tools, and restitution. Livestock classification can weaken interventions in the worst cases.
3. **Narrow Scope:** Applies only when primary use is partnership. Farm and ranch horses remain livestock.
4. **Familiar Tools:** Mirrors an existing framework. No new bureaucracy.
5. **Stakeholder Support:** Humane societies, equine therapy centers, riding schools, parents, veterans, disability advocates.
6. **Fiscal Impact:** Minimal. Cases are a subset of existing animal-cruelty workload. Restitution offsets care costs.
7. **Accountability and Deterrence:** Clearer charging increases deterrence and improves case outcomes, including rehoming.

PART IV — ENFORCEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION NOTES

- **Primary Use Standard:** Include a non-exclusive list of factors for “used primarily.” Prosecutors need discretion.
- **Training for Officers and ACOs:** One-pager on probable cause indicators for equine neglect or cruelty, species-appropriate shelter, and body condition scoring.
- **Coordination:** Encourage MOUs between humane societies, sheriff’s offices, and equine rescues for placement capacity.
- **Data and Reporting:** Agencies may log Equine Partner cases alongside companion-animal reports, no separate database required.

PART V — PENALTY AND REMEDY ALIGNMENT TABLE

Topic	Companion Animals (959.131)	Proposed Equine Partner (by amendment)	Proposed Equine Partner (new 959.132)
Active cruelty	Covered	Covered via inclusion	Covered verbatim
Serious physical harm	Covered	Covered via inclusion	Covered verbatim
Neglect: food, water, shelter	Covered	Covered via inclusion	Covered verbatim
Felony tiers	Available	Available	Available
Seizure, forfeiture, restitution	Available	Available	Available
Exemptions	Vet, research, others	Same plus ag carve-out	Same plus ag carve-out
Rulemaking	Not needed	Not needed	Optional targeted rules

PART VI — SAMPLE FACT PATTERNS AND CHARGING PATH

1. Starved lesson horse, indoor program:

Indicators: lesson contracts, rider schedules, instructor statements.

Charge: 959.131 with Equine Partner definition, or 959.132(B), (D).

Remedy: Seizure, veterinary care, restitution, ownership ban.

2. Event horse transported without water in heat:

Indicators: show entry, transport logs, barn manager affidavit.

Charge: neglect under (D)(3).

Remedy: Immediate impoundment, vet evaluation, restitution.

3. Therapy horse beaten by caretaker:

Indicators: therapy program documentation, witness statements, vet records.

Charge: (B) active cruelty, (C) serious physical harm if applicable.

Remedy: Forfeiture, program placement with partner facility.

PART VII — FAQs AND ANTICIPATED OBJECTIONS

Q: Does this criminalize agriculture or 4-H?

A: No. The statute applies only when primary use is human-equine partnership. Farm horses, breeding stock, and bona fide ranch work remain livestock.

Q: What proof shows “primary use”?

A: Any reliable combination of records: lesson or therapy schedules, competition entries, boarding contracts, instructor or therapist affidavits, veterinary notes indicating sport or therapy conditioning.

Q: Is there a cost to counties?

A: Minimal. Existing enforcement structures apply. Restitution provisions offset care costs. Case volume is a subset of current animal cases.

Q: Why not just raise penalties in the general cruelty statute?

A: Companion-animal law already supplies the modern penalty and remedy architecture. This approach adapts that tested framework to a targeted equine class.

PART VIII — STAKEHOLDER MAP AND OUTREACH

- **Core supporters:** Equine therapy programs, PATH Intl. affiliates, riding schools, 4-H clubs with lesson programs, veterans groups, disability advocates, humane societies, prosecuting attorneys association.
- **Neutral to supportive:** Many boarding barns, farriers, veterinarians.
- **Concerned:** Some agricultural groups. Address with the explicit agricultural carve-out and “primary use” standard.
- **Plan:** Assemble a sign-on letter, two or three testimonies from therapy centers and riding schools, and a prosecutor who can discuss charging challenges.

PART IX — OPTIONAL LANGUAGE TWEAKS

- **Add factor list to definition for clarity:**
“In determining whether an equine is used primarily in human-equine partnership, a court may consider competition or lesson records, therapy program records, boarding or training contracts, veterinary records reflecting sport or therapy care, affidavits of instructors, trainers, or therapists, and any other reliable evidence.”
- **Add explicit transport care clause (if desired):**
“A person shall not transport an Equine Partner in a manner that is likely to cause unnecessary suffering, including prolonged deprivation of water in extreme heat or cold.”
- **Add restitution specifics:**
“Restitution may include feed, veterinary treatment, farrier services, boarding during impoundment, and reasonable training or rehabilitation required for rehomeing.”