



SENATE MAJORITY OFFICE

Oregon State Legislature
State Capitol
Salem, OR

NEWS RELEASE

June 7, 2017

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Senate votes to protect ‘Good Samaritans’ for rescuing unattended children and domestic animals from hot cars

HB 2732 was promoted at the State Capitol by a group of local Girl Scouts

SALEM – The Oregon Senate Democrats joined with the House of Representatives and a group of local Girl Scouts to support protecting Good Samaritans from criminal or civil liability for removing an unattended child or domestic animal from a vehicle.

With the passage of House Bill 2732 – which prevailed in the Senate on a 29-0 vote – Oregon joins seven other states with similar laws designed to protect children and animals from heat-related health issues and other hazards that can arise from being left unattended in a vehicle. Sen. James Manning (D-Eugene) sponsored the bill in the Senate.

“We should be doing everything we can to protect our most vulnerable, and that includes animals and children,” Manning said. “I don’t care if somebody has to rip the door off a car; if that’s the only way they can rescue a child or an animal from potentially deadly harm, they should not be liable for property damage in those situations. They should be applauded as heroes. I also think that the local Girl Scouts who participated in the passage of this bill should be commended. For such a young group to be so committed to protecting other kids and animals who are placed in harmful situations, that is truly commendable.”

A small group of members from the Girl Scout Brownie Troop 10037 in the Salem area proposed the legislation. Troop members testified in the House and Senate committee hearings throughout the process. Rep. Brian Clem (D-Salem) – the father of one of the scouts – authored and introduced the bill.

“Rep. Clem told the girls that if they wanted to pursue this, he’d be happy to help them do that,” Troop 10037 Leader Carol Suzuki said. “They wanted to do something that kept animals and children safe.”

Under current Oregon law, police officers are authorized to enter the properties of others when it is necessary to prevent serious harm to any person or property. In 2015, the Legislature clarified that those same protections apply to law enforcement personnel who enter a private premises or motor vehicle to save an animal from distress. Police officers who have probable cause to believe that an animal is abused or neglected may enter the vehicle, as well as take the animal and provide it with food, water and care. In those situations, the police officer is not liable for any damages resulting from entering the vehicle.

This bill applies those same protections to any person who enters a vehicle, by force or otherwise, to protect a child or domestic animal from harm.

Hundreds of pets die every year from heat exhaustion because they are left in parked vehicles, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association. Temperatures inside a vehicle can rise nearly 20 degrees in just 10 minutes and 30 degrees in 20 minutes. On a 70-degree day, a vehicle left sitting can reach an internal temperature of 110 degrees.

Hot cars aren’t just hazardous to pets. According to some studies, more than 36 children die in overheated cars every year in the United States, adding up to well over 600 deaths since 1998. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has reported that hot vehicles are the primary non-crash, vehicle-related killer of children younger than 14.

HB 2732 now goes to Gov. Kate Brown for signature.

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