

Senator Pam Helming

Representing the 54th New York Senate District



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Senator Helming Bill Would Permit, Expand Use of Courthouse Facility Dogs

Senator Helming is sponsoring Senate bill S.4616 to authorize courts to permit the use of trained courthouse facility dogs for witness testimony. The bill is intended to support the psychological and emotional needs of children and people with developmental disabilities, but would enable any witness who requests a courthouse facility dog to use one while participating in legal proceedings and testifying in court.

“Children and people with special needs who have experienced a traumatic event should be given whatever support is needed during the judicial process. Nationwide, courthouse facility dog programs are innovative and effective in reducing a traumatized child’s anxiety and facilitating their ability to respond to questions and provide information during investigations and subsequent court proceedings. These facility dogs are professionally trained companions that provide calm and comfort during what can be a stressful experience for young and vulnerable individuals,” said Senator Helming.

These programs have existed in a limited capacity in New York State. Senator Helming’s legislation would facilitate a broader use of these programs by interested counties. It would also expand access for facility dogs beyond the courthouse, to locations including child advocacy centers, schools, medical facilities, offices of law enforcement, prosecutors and attorneys, specialty courts, and to court-appointed special advocates.

Ontario County District Attorney James Ritts requested that Senator Helming introduce the legislation. The county recently welcomed Juno, a 2-year-old Golden Labrador Retriever, as its trained courthouse facility dog.

“Courthouse dogs are another amazing opportunity to help children and victims who have suffered through traumatic experiences. Unlike therapy dogs, the courthouse dogs are available to any victim, witness, and survivor to aid in their journey through the court system – be it the Criminal Courts, Family Court, or other times the Judge finds to be appropriate. I am proud to support the efforts of Senator Helming in this most important effort,” said Ontario County District Attorney James Ritts.

The American Academy of Pediatrics identifies assistance from courthouse facility dogs as an effective psychosocial support intervention for children participating in legal proceedings. These programs are also effective for people with developmental disabilities, adults who experienced childhood trauma, and other individuals needing support during a legal process.

Courthouse facility dogs are professionally trained to assist witnesses and are used nationwide in prosecutor offices, family and specialty courts, and child advocacy centers. According to the [Courthouse Dogs Foundation](#), more than 250 facility dogs are working in 41 states.

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