

June 3rd, 2025

Testimony on Assembly Bill 239

Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Thank you, Chairman Spiros and other Assembly committee members, for holding a hearing today on Assembly Bill 239, relating to the harassment of search and rescue K9s and providing a penalty.

AB 239 is pretty straightforward. It prohibits anyone from frightening, intimidating, threatening, abusing, or harassing a search and rescue K9. It also prohibits striking, shoving, kicking, or otherwise subjecting the K9 to physical contact. Additionally, it makes it illegal to strike a search and rescue K9 using a dangerous weapon.

These same protections are granted to any animal that is used by a law enforcement agency or fire department.

Search and Rescue K9s are highly trained working animals who deserve legal protection from harm, intimidation, and abuse. These K9s are often deployed in dangerous and high-stress situations, from natural disasters to wilderness searches, where they save lives by locating missing persons and disaster victims.

Extending existing protections to include search and rescue K9s acknowledges their vital role in public safety. It ensures that anyone who intentionally injures or threatens them is held accountable.

This bill doesn't create new categories of punishment. Still, it aligns the law to treat harm against all public service K9s equally, regardless of whether they serve a police officer or a volunteer-led rescue operation.

I respectfully urge your support for AB 239 to ensure these dedicated animals receive the same legal protections as other service K9s. Thank you for your time today and consideration of this bill.

I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.



June 3rd, 2025

Representative Spiros, Chair
Representative Piwowarczyk, Vice-Chair
Members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Testimony on 2025 Assembly Bill 239

Relating to: harassment of search and rescue dogs and providing a penalty.

Thank you, Chairman Spiros, and other members of the committee for listening to my testimony today. This bill is one in a package of bills designed to protect and support the incredible service that search and rescue dogs, and their handlers provide to our communities.

Search and rescue dogs are highly trained, selfless animals that assist in extremely dangerous and high-stress situations—locating missing persons, responding to disasters, and ultimately saving lives. Just like police and fire K-9s, they make a massive difference in assisting first responders and rescue teams. As a former Police and Fire Chief, I've seen firsthand the abilities of these services dogs to track people and evidence that we would have never been able to find otherwise.

Assembly Bill 239 seeks to provide equal protections for search and rescue dogs as those currently afforded to animals working alongside police and fire departments. As these teams serve in fraught disaster situations, handlers deserve to know that their dogs are protected from people who might seek them harm. I want to see volunteers operate with confidence, knowing that the law will have their back if bad actors threaten or hurt their dogs.

This bill will make a simple but vital change and honor the service of Wisconsin's search and rescue dog teams. It is a small but important step in supporting those who volunteer their time and canine partners to keep our communities safe. Thank you all again for your consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse James".

Senator Jesse James
23rd Senate District
Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov

June 3rd, 2025

The Honorable Members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Re: Support for Assembly Bill 239 – Protection for Search and Rescue Dogs

Dear Members of the Committee,

I am writing to express my strong support for Assembly Bill 239, which extends crucial legal protections to include search and rescue dogs—animals who serve a vital, often life-saving role in our communities. These dogs and their handlers are not paid staff, they are volunteers who spend hundreds of hours training and thousands of dollars to not only train but equip these animals to be prepared when our communities call on our training and expertise. Yet there is no protection for these animals if something tragic potentially could happen.

As a search and rescue handler in Wisconsin, I know firsthand the importance of these animals in emergency response. My dog and I have responded to many calls to locate missing individuals, often in difficult and dangerous conditions. These dogs are more than partners—they are highly trained tools in the effort to bring loved ones home safely.

I want to share one experience that underscores why this legislation is so urgently needed.

During a recent holiday, my dog and I were paged out by the county sheriff for an active search involving a missing 80-year-old dementia patient. While in-route to our assigned search area, we encountered a group of bear hunters who blocked our access and refused to let us pass as they had physically blocked the entire road. Despite explaining that we were on an official search and rescue call, they insisted we turn around, citing their hunting activity, unfortunately there was no quick way to turn around or reroute as I was already on backroads. Had I turned around and gone back the way I came it would have taken me an additional hour and a half to get to the search area. The situation quickly escalated, and I became increasingly concerned—not just for my own safety, but for the safety of my search dog. The hunters' actions were aggressive, and their disregard for the urgency of our mission could have led to real harm. We had a missing grandfather, time for us to get to the search was precious and being delayed with physical threats to myself and my dog could have not only resulted in our injury but the delay also kept us from the search of this missing man. Minutes count on a search and this situation was potentially dangerous. My vehicle is marked Search and Rescue K9 Unit and I was in uniform as well. I was clearly marked as a first responder yet these men threatened me with serious harm.

It was only after I threatened to contact the Sheriff, who had dispatched us, and the Sheriff of the county I lived in, as I was out of county, that they finally relented. By then, precious time had been lost, and the stress on both myself and my K9 partner was immense. Sadly the location this occurred in had no cell service, typical of the backwoods of northern Wisconsin, so if things had potentially gone badly I would have been unable to call for help. This experience left me shaken and deeply aware of how vulnerable we are without clear legal protections.

Assembly Bill 239 sends a message: search and rescue dogs, and the handlers who work alongside them, deserve the same respect and legal safeguards as other emergency responders. These dogs are not hobby animals—they are part of an organized, professionally trained emergency response system.

Please support Assembly Bill 239. It's not just about protecting dogs—it's about protecting public safety, valuing volunteer responders, and ensuring that those who impede or endanger critical life-saving efforts are held accountable.

Thank you for your time and your dedication to public service.

Sincerely,

Heather Wisner
Team Captain, and K9 Team Leader for Gichigami Search and Rescue

Members of the Assembly Criminal Justice & Public Safety Committee,

As the advocacy voice of the responsible pet care community, the Pet Advocacy Network represents the interests and expertise of retailers, companion animal suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, pet owners, and others involved in the many aspects of pet care across the United States. Our association promotes animal well-being and responsible pet ownership, fosters environmental stewardship, and ensures healthy pets' availability through our local, state, and federal work. In addition, we routinely advocate for legislative and regulatory proposals to protect the health, safety, and availability of companion animals.

The Pet Advocacy Network strongly supports **Assembly Bill 239**, which would extend legal protections to search and rescue dogs under Wisconsin law. These highly trained working animals provide vital services in times of crisis, and it's time the law reflects their value and vulnerability.

Under current statute, police and fire animals are protected from harassment, abuse, or physical harm. AB 239 rightly expands those same protections to search and rescue dogs, who are often first on the scene following natural disasters, missing person cases, and other emergencies. They endure extreme conditions, cover difficult terrain, and work side-by-side with emergency responders to save lives.

This bill is not only about deterrence, it's about respect. Search and rescue dogs are trained by state and nationally recognized agencies, and their service should be acknowledged and protected just like that of police K-9s and fire department animals.

We encourage the committee to advance AB 239 and send a strong message that Wisconsin values the lives and service of all working animals dedicated to public safety.

Sincerely,

Lauren Calmet

Pet Advocacy Network