



Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse

The renaissance of interest in the links between animal abuse and other forms of family violence has been accepted widely by the field of animal care and control and, to a lesser degree, by domestic violence prevention and child protection. The growing interest in the "link" is not meant to imply that animals are more important than people. It does imply, however, that no forms of family violence should be tolerated and that when any member of the family is abused, others are at risk. A coordinated, multi-disciplinary approach shows great promise in helping remove significant obstacles that prevent battered women from leaving abusive relationships.

How do animals fit into the lives of women who are abused?

The likelihood that women's shelter personnel will encounter women and children who have been coerced or controlled by batterers using animal abuse as a weapon is high:

1. More families in America have pets than have children.
2. The majority of pet owners are parents with children.
3. 64.1% of households with children under age 6, and 74.8% of households with children over age 6, also have pets.
4. In study after study, as many as 71% of pet-owning women seeking shelter at safe houses have reported that their partner had threatened and/or actually hurt or killed one or more of their pets; 32% of these women reported that one or more of their children had also hurt or killed pets. These women are reporting, in alarmingly high numbers, that their animals are harmed or threatened to perpetuate the landscape of terror under which they live. They are prevented from leaving their abusers because they fear what will happen to the animals in their absence.

How would cross-reporting identify or reduce risk factors?

Aggressive acts against any member of the family endanger all members, and put others in the community at risk as well. In households with animal abuse, there are very likely other forms of abuse. Inter-agency collaboration may help reduce family and community violence.

Why should animal protection agencies be included in domestic violence prevention teams?

1. **Animal abuse is an early indicator** of a chaotic household where the safety of women and/or children is compromised.
2. **Threatening an animal's welfare is an effective way to buy a woman's silence.** Batterers typically isolate their victims to maintain their control and prevent the victim's disclosure or escape. Coercive threats and actions often involve the safety of pets (and livestock in rural environments). Many batterers control women by harming or killing family pets or threatening to do so; sometimes the animals simply disappear or die mysteriously.
3. **A significant number of battered women are denied access to, or defer going to, safe houses** because no one will care for their animals.
4. **Discussing pets is a diagnostic tool.** Psychologists and caseworkers can often discern critical information and assess risk factors by inquiring about the status of family pets. Victims who may be reluctant to talk about themselves may be expansive about their pets.
5. **Neighbors are frequently more willing to report** suspected animal abuse and neglect than they are to report suspected domestic violence or child abuse. Animal care and control officers may be the first responders to a family in trouble -- critical community caregivers who are alert to other family problems.



Why should agencies take cross-training and learn to recognize and report other forms of family violence?

1. **We can broaden coverage.** Animal protection personnel are often the first public agency to intervene. Society often has a lower tolerance for animal abuse than for domestic violence. Cross-reporting:
 - a. **expands limited resources**, bringing cases of maltreatment to public attention that might otherwise go unreported.
 - b. **builds public support** for violence prevention.
 - c. **mobilizes the philanthropic and volunteer sectors.**
2. **Animals may serve as barometers** for families needing help because:
 - a. **animal maltreatment** may be observed more readily by neighbors.
 - b. **outsiders may be more willing** to report abuse or neglect of an animal.
3. **Studies have reported significant overlaps** in multi-victim family violence.
4. **Federal funds are available** for innovative violence-prevention programs that include animal protection agencies.
5. **Compartmentalization of programs is clearly not working.** Reports of child abuse and neglect are increasing while the percentage of cases investigated is decreasing. It is time to consider a more integrated approach.

spcaLA understands how traumatic domestic violence cases can be and is proud to take part in assisting victims with putting their lives back together. For more information on spcaLA's Animal Safety Net (ASN) program, please call the special ASN info line 323-733-0219.