

Animal Cruelty and Domestic Violence

Animal cruelty and domestic violence often go hand in hand. Batterers sometimes use abuse of pets as a way of intimidating or controlling other family members. They may threaten to hurt the pet if the victim leaves or threaten to physically abuse the victim in the same way. During Prevention of Animal Cruelty month this April, learn more about this issue and how you can help by visiting the ASPCA webpage about domestic violence and animal cruelty.

The Connection between Domestic Violence and Animal Cruelty

How is Animal Abuse Related to Domestic Violence?

In recent years, a strong connection has been documented linking animal abuse and domestic violence. A New Jersey study found that in 88 percent of families where there had been physical abuse of children, there were also records of animal abuse. In Wisconsin, battered women revealed that in four out of five cases, abusive partners had also been violent toward pets or livestock. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence conducted its own study in which 85.4 percent of women and 63.0 percent of children reported incidents of pet abuse after arriving at domestic violence shelters. The Chicago Police Department's Domestic Violence Program took a look at the criminal histories of animal fighting/animal abuse arrestees for 2000-2001 and found that approximately 30 percent had domestic violence charges on their records. There is legitimate evidence that the individuals involved in violent acts against animals present a danger to the public that must be addressed. Intentional animal abuse is often seen in association with other serious crimes including drug offenses, gang activity, weapons violations, sexual assault and domestic violence—and can be one of the most visible parts of an entire history of aggressive or antisocial behavior.

Why do Abusers Batter Animals?

- To demonstrate power and control over the family
- To isolate the victim and children
- To enforce submission
- To perpetuate an environment of fear
- To prevent the victim from leaving or coerce her to return
- To punish for leaving or showing independence

What Can Law Enforcement Do?

It is imperative that first responders understand the connection between animal abuse and family violence. When responding to domestic calls it is imperative to be alert for signs

that children and/or pets might be victimized. Children may be more willing to discuss what has happened to a pet than their own victimization.

Victims and their children should be asked:

- Do you have any pets?
- Has the batterer or any else threatened to harm your pet?
- Will you need assistance in finding a safe place for the pet if you leave?

Be sure to document any signs of animal abuse and report it to the appropriate agency empowered to investigate animal cruelty. Many victims will not go forward with the prosecution of their abuser. However, prosecution on animal cruelty charges can result in incarceration or treatment equivalent to what might result from a domestic violence prosecution.

What Can Victim Advocates and Domestic Violence Shelters Do?

- Work with victims to be sure they include pets in their safety planning
- Include questions about any threats or injuries to pets on your intake questionnaires
- Work with legislators to insure that pets can be included in orders of protection and educate judges about the necessity to do so
- Work with your local humane organizations or animal control to establish programs for the emergency housing of pets coming from homes experiencing violence

What Can Animal Shelters and Humane Organizations Do?

- Reach out to local domestic violence shelters and establish programs for emergency housing of pets from homes with domestic violence
- If no space is available, work with animal foster care agencies to establish a network of homes that might provide emergency care for these pets
- Incorporate information on these connections in school programs, particularly those that might reach children at risk of family violence

Conclusion

Animal cruelty is increasingly viewed as a serious issue by professionals in law enforcement and mental health—as well as by the general public. The effective prosecution of animal abuse has many benefits. It can provide an early and timely response to those who are, or who are risk of becoming, a threat to the safety of others. It can provide an added tool for the protection of those who are victims of family violence. Finally, it can bring personal satisfaction in developing new skills and new understanding, and helping build a truly compassionate society.