

Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse

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Introduction

The issue of family pets belonging to women and children escaping domestic violence is a major concern for women and a problem for support agencies. Women subjected to domestic violence are often inhibited in their decision-making by the threat to the safety of the family pet. In Victoria, women's refuges are mainly communal models and are not designed to house the animals belonging to their residents. The problem of what to do with the animals has never been addressed by the support services. Women themselves have had to find individual solutions.

There needs to be recognition of the problem and a coordinated response developed. In Australia the issue of animal abuse and the link with domestic violence is only now starting to emerge. In the U.S. and Canada the issue has been acknowledged and assistance programs introduced. Animal abuse is an under-recognised component of domestic violence. We have anecdotal evidence that perpetrators of violence use threats of physical harm to pet animals in order to control their victims. There is evidence that the tendency to abuse animals is significant in children who are maltreated and an indicator of a disturbed environment. There is acceptance that the dynamics of domestic violence are complex and include multiple victims.

Overseas Developments and Research

The domestic violence crisis unit in Cheltenham, England established the Pet's Project – a scheme designed to provide safety and shelter to animals belonging to women who contacted the unit. The Pet's Project involved the use of volunteer foster families for the animals whilst the women were in shelters.

Kimball Lewis (1993) working with the Bureau of Animal Protection in Colorado, in the United States 'began to see an increasing obvious pattern as animal violence and crimes against people became more and more intertwined'. In 1997, Lewis established the first Domestic Violence Assistance Program and this program has now been introduced nationwide. It provides immediate emergency shelter for any animal belonging to any woman or family in crisis as a result of family violence.

The Humane Society of the United States has recently launched its First Strike Campaign Kit on the links between animal abuse and human violence. The kit is free to all countries, to anyone interested. In Los Angeles the Crisis Line asks women, requesting shelter, how many children do they have and do they have any pets.

In Ontario, Canada the Family Violence Assistance Program provides safe shelter for pets through branches and affiliates of the SPCA across the province. 'In 2000, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) surveyed a group of women in Ontario women's shelters. Some 44% had pets abused or killed by their partners, 42% had pets threatened by their partners, and 43% reported that concerns over the safety of their pets prevented them from leaving sooner. These findings mirrored American research and an earlier SPCA study. The Ontario SPCA may be the only animal protection organisation in North America to have a full-time violence prevention coordinator on staff' (Arkow 2001).

In Ontario, as part of a new initiative, cross training programs are being developed involving animal protection officers, domestic violence workers and child protection staff with the aim of creating a shared awareness and recognition of the interwoven patterns. There is a multi disciplinary approach to the linkages between domestic violence, animal abuse and child abuse.

Response in Victoria

In July 2000 the Eastern Domestic Violence Outreach Service started to develop the Eastern Pet's Project based on the model in Cheltenham in the United Kingdom. The Eastern Pet's Project evolved because of a chance meeting with a young English woman who had coordinated the project in Cheltenham.

The Eastern Pet's Project relied on the use of volunteer foster families to shelter the pets of women using refuges in the Eastern Metropolitan region of Melbourne. An advertisement seeking volunteers was placed in the local paper. Many of the volunteers were women who had experienced domestic violence themselves and were offering to help other women to leave. This was an unexpected outcome. It was decided to confine the project to a small group initially as the Pet's Project had not been successful in achieving funding. A close working partnership was established with RSPCA in Victoria and protocols were developed. Formal legal agreements between the Outreach Service, pet owners and foster carers had to be written to cover any possible litigation that may eventuate between the parties. Legal contracts were devised by a well known legal firm in Melbourne working pro-bono.

Currently the Pet's Project is on hold as the first recipient of this new service had to be put down. It died possibly due to injuries previously inflicted. This event precipitated a more enlightened approach to the issue of pets and what to do with them. We realised that the animals have all possibly been hurt, damaged and traumatised and therefore are not suitable candidates for families to foster. On reflection and becoming increasingly more aware of the different responses in the U.S. and Canada has now taken us down a different path. It is our intention to develop a state-wide response using established large animal shelters instead of volunteer families. But to do this we need data to demonstrate the need.

In July this year, the Eastern Domestic Violence Outreach Service surveyed the women living in refuges in Victoria. This survey is based on the same questions that was used by the Ontario SPCA 2000 Province-wide Women's Shelter Survey (Daniell 2001). The questions are as follows:

- Do you currently have a pet?
- Has your partner ever hurt or killed one of your pets?
- Has your partner ever threatened to hurt or kill one of your pets?
- Has any member of your family ever hurt or killed one of your pets?
- Did concern over your pet's welfare keep you from coming to this refuge sooner than now?

The results of the Victorian survey will be discussed at the Conference in September. This information will be invaluable in negotiations with the large animal shelters. Recently the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Line in Victoria, in recognition of the problem, included a question about pets on their intake form.

What needs to be done

Firstly an immediate practical response providing safety to pets must be developed and implemented by support agencies. This response should be cost-neutral with the aid of the animal

shelters. Each state in Australia could have its own Domestic Violence Assistance Program (DVAP).

Secondly, research must be undertaken in this country on the linkages between domestic violence, animal abuse and child abuse. Domestic violence services, child protection agencies and programs for perpetrators need to identify and document instances of animal abuse to inform future prevention strategies for domestic violence.

‘Spouse abuse and child abuse have traditionally been examined as separate issues; distinct service delivery systems have developed to address them, and practitioners frequently fail to recognise the direct and important relationships between the two. It is easy to lose sight of the broader picture. It is easy to overlook the fact that child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence are directly related as different manifestations of the common denominator of family violence’ (Tebault 1999).

In recent years there has been recognition of the presence of violence against women in situations of child abuse. We now need to examine the implications of animal abuse as a strong indicator of a violent household.

References.

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