Animal Cruelty and the Link with Domestic Violence – Mary Savidge, Safeline

There are numerous studies going back decades detailing strong links between animal cruelty and domestic violence. This article hopes to illuminate these distressing issues thereby creating greater awareness and support for the victims, both human and animal, of domestic violence. The abusive, and mostly illegal, tactics used by abusers are not limited to domestic partners and children. It often extends to abusive treatment of pets in the home as well. A few facts:

* Nationwide almost 75 percent of domestic violence victims report that their partners threatened to kill a family pet. [[1]](#endnote-1)

In a study of abused women in several northeastern states,

* 48 percent of respondents reported that animal abuse had occurred “often” during the past 12 months.
* 30 percent reported animal abuse combined with other domestic or sexual abuse occurred “almost always”.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In 2008 only three states – Maine, New York and Vermont - had enacted laws permitting family pets to be included in protective court orders involving cases of domestic violence. Now almost half the states have such laws. Animal abuse, like domestic violence and child abuse often remain hidden behind closed doors. This secrecy is used by the abuser to control and demean the people the abusers is closest to, or lives with.

Sad as this is to report, abuse of animals is calculated to:

* Demonstrate power and control over the family.
* Teach submission; or force a family to keep the violence a secret.
* Retaliate for acts of independence and self-determination.
* Perpetuate an environment of terror.
* Punish a victim for leaving; or coerce them to return.
* Degrade the victim through involvement in the abuse.[[3]](#endnote-3)

According to Wayne Pacelle, President and CEO of The Humane Society of the United States, “The bond between people and their pets is so powerful that people would rather stay in an abusive situation if it means protecting their animal. A pet is sometimes the only positive and unconditional relationship that a victim might have and that means they will do absolutely anything to keep them safe. We want the law to recognize that for most people, a pet is part of the family and therefore a victim – and a pawn – in the horrendous cycle of domestic violence.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The effective prosecution of animal abusers can provide an early response to those who are at risk of becoming a danger to themselves or others – and can provide help leading to the protection of victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Animal Abuse: if you see something should you say something? YES - calls to the police and animal welfare agencies are investigated keeping the reporter anonymous. The Humane Society of the United States has created *A Campaign Against Violence / First Strike*. The HSUS, through research, investigations and work with law enforcement has acquired in-depth knowledge of the ways that animal cruelty and human violence intersect. The First Strike campaign is designed to share and increase public awareness of this connection to encourage everyone to take animal cruelty seriously. When a youth is involved with animal cruelty, early reporting is essential. Helping to identify abusers early (through education and monitoring) could well protect the lives of animals and people in their future. Early intervention could likely help young people NOT continue abhorrent behavior that could lead to escalated animal and or people abuse down the road.

Organizations, such as Safeline, that serve to empower and protect victims of domestic and sexual violence work with victims to ensure safety plans for people and their animals. Clients are asked about safety plans for themselves, their dependents and their animals. Establishing safety plans includes planning for the safety of pets. Safeline victims have worked with High Horses Therapeutic Riding Program in Sharon VT. Through the High Horses “Connections” program several Safeline clients[[5]](#endnote-5) have worked with to re-establish trust in relationships and renewed senses of self-worth. Dogs and cats often serve organizations as therapy animals as well. Maz, the therapy dog at the Orange County Sheriff’s Special Investigations Unit, helps children, who have experienced abuse, trust in the SIU investigation process. Our four-legged friends can offer effective therapy, helping survivors to heal.

The issues of domestic violence and animal abuse are linked. We should not be bystanders. Animal abuse, domestic and sexual violence are preventable. For more information on effective intervention in abusive situations there are many resources available. Please consult Safeline [info@safeline.org](mailto:info@safeline.org) or your local and state police for information. Safeline’s 24/7 Hotline: 1-800-639-7233.

1. Faver, C.A., & Strand, E.B., (2003). To leave or to stay? Battered women’s concern for vulnerable pets. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 18, 6, 162-177. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Carlisle-Frank, P. & Flanagan, T. (2004). Selective battering of the family pet. Anthrozoos, 17, 26-42 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Animal Cruelty/Domestic Violence Fact Sheet / The Humane Society of the United States / humanesociety.org [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ditto(all women who are overwhelmingly [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In FY 17-18 Safeline served and supported 334 Adults and 58 Children with legal advocacy, crisis intervention, safety plans, Hotline calls, and financial, educational and housing advocacy. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)