

How Protecting Pets Can Help Victims of Domestic Violence

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Pets are part of American families – a poll conducted in 2015 found that 95% of pet owners consider their pets to be family members. What is more, pets often serve as the only source of unconditional love for individuals living in abusive relationships. In fact, abusers often manipulate their victims via their bonds with pets.

Consider the following scenario: a victim of abuse attempts to flee, but the abuser threatens the life or well-being of a cherished pet to coerce the victim into remaining in the dangerous relationship. In similarly troubling scenarios, abusers use threats to pets to prevent children from reporting physical and sexual abuse.

Since the 2018 federal Pet and Women Safety (PAWS) Act passed, the welfare of the victim's pet need no longer cause a victim to feel the need to endure abuse. The PAWS Act established a grant program to provide shelter and housing assistance to domestic violence survivors and their pets – including service and emotional support animals and horses. This program applies in federal law pertaining to interstate stalking, protection order violations, and restitution. Victims no longer have to put their lives at risk in order to protect the welfare of their pets.

Domestic Violence and the Alabama Context

Research shows that pet abuse is one of four significant predictors of intimate partner violence. Almost half of victims of abuse do not leave their abusive relationships for fear of leaving their beloved pet(s) behind. In one survey, 71% of domestic violence survivors reported that their abuser threatened, injured or killed their pets. Victims may also return to abusive situations out of fear for the safety of their loved animals. In some cases, abusers use financial restraints or coercion to prevent their victim from seeking additional help.

Domestic violence continues to be a prevalent issue in the State of Alabama. The most recent Alabama Domestic Violence Report (2017) revealed that domestic violence was recorded in 4,291 violent offenses including 30 homicides, 283 rapes, 111 robberies, and 3,867 aggravated assaults and these numbers only account for reported incidents.

Despite the severity of these problems, legal protections for Alabama's victims of abuse remain inadequate. Currently, 33 states have implemented legislation that include special provisions for pets in domestic violence protective orders along with children, close family, or household members threatened by the abuser due to their relationship with the victim. However, the state of Alabama remains one of the few states that does not have specific inclusions for pets in petitions for orders granting temporary or final protection from an abuser.

Ways Forward

Several steps make sense:

Legislation – Existing temporary protective orders include emergency custody of children, the same could be true for pets. The Uniform Interstate Enforcement of Domestic Violence Protection Orders Act states, "*an order of protection covers the victim, his or her minor children, and any other close family or household members that may be living with the victim or were also threatened by the abuser due to their relationship with the victim (such as his or her aging mother, etc.)*" A simple provision could add pets to the order of protection, which would add an additional layer of accountability.

Rather than viewing pets as property, animals associated domestic violence cases should be considered household members in many instances. Victims view pets as members of their families and if their whole family is protected, they will be more likely to seek help. The Animal Welfare Institute created guidelines for

implementing protective orders for companion animals, establishing custody, providing legal aid, and other resources.

Judicial Offices Training – Since application forms for a Protection from Abuse order do not refer to pets, questions and issues concerning pets may be overlooked and victims may not think to ask about available protections. Those assisting victims with filing the order may also fail to ask direct questions out about past harm, threats, or intimidation of victims' pets.

Domestic violence is a pattern, rarely just a one-time event. Documenting past or current abuse of animals can be relevant in painting a clearer picture of an abuser's past failures. Therefore, it is important that judges understand the history of abusive actions and how they fit into a larger cycle of violence. In addition to judges, attorneys, advocates, veterinarians, law enforcement, and service providers also need to understand how animal abuse can be part of the cycle of repeated domestic violence.

Expansion of Shelters with Pet Provisions and Pet Safety Plans – More supports are available for Alabama's domestic abuse survivors with pets given the recent establishment of Shelby SafePet – a humane society service tailored specifically for domestic violence survivors. Combined with improvements to the legal system, these services make it more likely that victims will find ways out of their abusive relationships.

To build on this work, pet safety plans should be created and discussed with victims, and the state should support this work. Protecting pets and families from harm helps protect victims from further harm. Victims of domestic violence should never have to choose between their own safety and the safety of their pets.

Read more in Amber Sutton and Catherine Carlson, “Advocating for Self-Determination, Arriving at Safety: How Social Workers Can Address Ethical Dilemmas in Intimate Partner Violence,” in *The Routledge Handbook for Social Work Ethics and Values*, edited by Stephen M. Marson and Robert E. McKinney, Jr. (Routledge Press, 2019).