

Animal Abuse IS Family Violence: Making The Connection

When most people think of family violence, they think of child abuse, partner/spouse abuse, and elder abuse. However, this definition overlooks an important component of family violence: animal abuse. Most Americans have pets and consider them to be a part of their families—and all too often, pets become caught in the web of family violence as well.

Abusers use violence toward pets as a way to control, intimidate, and retaliate against other members of the family. Frequently, abusers hurt or threaten to hurt pets to prevent human victims from escaping the abusive situation or even telling someone about the abuse. In several studies, over 70% of victims entering domestic violence shelters reported that their abusers harmed or threatened to harm their pets. In another study, 85% of domestic violence shelter staff surveyed across the nation acknowledged that they had heard animal abuse discussed by victims entering their shelters.

Unfortunately, most domestic violence shelters do not accept animals. Research indicates that a substantial number of victims are delayed or prevented from leaving abusive situations because they cannot bring their pets with them to safety. Many victims are particularly concerned that their pets will become targets for retaliation if left behind.

Ahimsa House

(www.ahimsahouse.org) is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization that provides shelter and aid to the animal victims of domestic violence across Georgia. Animals are housed in foster care or veterinary/boarding facilities until they can be reunited with their human companions. If you or someone you know needs assistance in finding safe housing for a pet while seeking safety from abuse, please call our crisis hotline at 404-452-6248. For general information and all other requests, Ahimsa House can be reached at 404-496-4038. A directory of "Safe Havens For Pets" programs in other areas, as well as information about how to start a program in your own community, is available from the Humane Society of the United States at 1-888-213-0956.

Sadly for both the animal and human

victims of domestic violence, lack of awareness about this topic, as well as interagency disagreement about "which species matters more," has hampered efforts to build collaborative networks against family violence. In fact, paying attention to the connection between animal abuse and family violence benefits both humans and animals. If you agree, you can help to raise awareness about this issue within your community and through elected officials. Several communities across the U.S. have successfully built cross-species coalitions against violence, involving cooperation among social services (domestic violence programs, sexual assault centers, child protective services), animal welfare (animal control, humane societies and animal rescue groups, veterinarians), law enforcement, and lawmakers. When we recognize animal abuse as part of the spectrum of family violence, we can generate much stronger efforts to halt violence in all its forms.

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