

# St. Louis Post-Dispatch

October 30, 2004 Saturday

## Domestic Violence Strikes Pets, Too

By Sarah Casey Newman, The Post-Dispatch

More safe-haven programs are needed. WHAT'S TRULY frightening on Halloween night is frightening every night of the year – and every day as well: Every nine seconds, a woman is battered. Also frightening is the fact that if a family member is being abused, chances are the family pet is also a victim.

According to the Humane Society of the United States, a 1997 survey of 50 of the nation's largest shelters for battered women found that 85 percent of the women and 63 percent of the children reported animal abuse in the family.

Moreover, children who have witnessed or been the victims of physical abuse may become animal abusers. In a 1995 study by the Humane Society, 32 percent of domestic-violence victims who owned pets reported that one or more of their children had hurt or killed an animal.

The link between violence toward animals and violence toward humans is well-established. "Individuals who start out abusing animals go on to abusing humans nearly 100 percent of the time," says Erin Ercoline.

Ercoline is the executive director of ALIVE (Alternatives to Living in Violent Environments). In addition to its educational and outreach programs, the nonprofit organization provides counseling, therapy, court advocacy, treatment, emergency shelter and other programs and services for victims of domestic violence.

It also has a 24-hour emergency hot line for victims: 314-993-2777.

In the broadest sense, batterers threaten, abuse and kill animals to manipulate and control their victims. According to the Humane Society, batterers use animal abuse to:

- Demonstrate power and control.
- Teach submission.
- Isolate victims and children.
- Eliminate competition for attention.
- Force family members to keep the violence secret.
- Retaliate for acts of independence.
- Prevent victims from leaving, punish them for leaving or coerce them to return.

- Degrade victims by involving them in the abuse.

Here's something else that's scary: Nearly 20 percent of the women in the 1997 shelter survey said they had delayed leaving an abusive situation because they feared for the safety of a companion animal.

Those who can't understand why someone would stay in an abusive situation for the sake of an animal fail to understand what an important role animals can play in people's lives, says Katherine McGowan, executive director of the Animal Protective Association of Missouri. "The animal may be a victim's only source of comfort and unconditional love."

Leaving and taking the animal along is not always easy. Most shelters for victims of domestic violence cannot accommodate pets. Ercoline knows of none in the metro area.

Most animal shelters are in no position to help, either. Pam Whitcraft, supervisor of the adoption center at the Humane Society of Missouri, says she gets calls "all the time" from abuse victims looking for temporary shelter for their pets.

"Sometimes they just show up out of the blue with their pets in tow," she said.

But unless they're willing to relinquish their animals for adoption, there usually is little that can be done.

Education director Sue Gassner says that the society "is very, very interested in beginning a safe-haven program for animal victims of domestic violence. But it's a very involved process, so I can't say how long it may be before we have one in place."

To Ercoline's knowledge, the APA is the only area shelter with a formal safe-haven program.

"We started it about 1998, and since then we've helped over 60 pets," McGowan said.

"Currently we have four pets in the program."

The program uses volunteer foster families to provide homes for the animals of abuse victims. "To be considered, victims must be enrolled in one of the participating women's shelters – there are eight in the St. Louis area that we partner with; they must have proof of need and show that they're working to improve their situation. We'll care for the pet for up to 12 weeks, which is in sync with what most domestic-violence shelters tend to consider a decent amount of time for a victim to spend in their program."

Earlier this year, the Humane Society of the United States launched an online Safe Haven for Animals directory, which lists shelters that provide temporary housing for the pets of domestic-abuse victims. The APA in St. Louis and the Safe House for Women in Cape Girardeau are the only Missouri listings. In Illinois, the only ones are the Naperville Humane Society and Friends of Strays in Princeton.

The programs are so few in part because the link between violence to animals and violence to people is still a relatively new area of study. Even professionals don't always make the connection.

In its most recent survey of domestic-abuse shelters, the Humane Society of the United States found that 91 percent of those who work with domestic-violence cases have heard adult victims talk about incidents of animal abuse, and 73 percent have heard children talk about it – yet only 18 percent of the shelters reported that they “routinely ask about pets when a victim comes to them for services.”

Often, it's the animal advocates who first make the connection.

Four years ago, the Humane Society of Missouri formed a partnership with the St. Louis Police Department, St. Louis Division of Family Services and the circuit attorney's office to help prevent violence against people and animals by building awareness of the link between the two.

The resulting Web of Cruelty program the Humane Society of Missouri now offers takes that awareness into the community. “What we teach in the Web of Cruelty forums is that we all have to work together to be the eyes and ears of those who can't speak for themselves,” Gassner said.

“This means that if the Humane Society goes into someone's premises to investigate a report of animal neglect or cruelty, while we're there we're going to also be looking for signs of domestic violence, child abuse and elderly abuse,” she said.

“Likewise, if Meals on Wheels volunteers are delivering food to the elderly, they need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of animal neglect and what they can do about it.

“The idea is that we cross-train people and share information with each other. This way, everybody's eyes are open to the welfare and needs of everyone in the family, whether it's a child, an animal, an elderly person or whoever.”

The Web of Cruelty message “is a vital one,” Gassner said. “And I think it's something those of us in the animal community have been aware of for some time. Animal abuse is seldom isolated. Child abuse is seldom isolated. Domestic violence is seldom isolated.”

Recently, Whitcraft said, a woman came into the adoption center at the Humane Society of Missouri with her dog, her cat and her two children. “She was obviously extremely upset, and when we explained that we couldn't board her animals for her, she became even more distraught.”

When Whitcraft asked if she had a friend or relative who could keep her pets for a while, the woman said she had been so upset that she had never even thought of it.

Whitcraft “sat her down and talked with her for a while, and eventually the woman thought of a friend who could take the pets.”

The point, Whitcraft says, is that in many cases victims don't plan ahead, not just for their animals but for themselves.

Developing an emergency plan for sheltering themselves, their children and their animals is imperative. But where do they begin?

Ercoline advises victims of domestic violence to "start talking to people about it." Once you start talking about leaving, "it makes it real and it starts opening up avenues of help. You'd be surprised how many resources there are out there," she said.

### Protecting pets

To protect pets, the Humane Society of the United States advises victims of domestic violence to:

- Work out an emergency shelter plan for the pet.
- Establish ownership of the pet by obtaining an animal license, proof of vaccinations or veterinary receipts in your name.
- Prepare pets for leaving by collecting vaccination and medical records, collars, tags, bowls, medication and other necessities.
- Ask law-enforcement or animal-control officers for assistance in reclaiming a pet that had to be left behind.

October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. For more information on domestic violence and its link to animal abuse, contact:

- ALIVE: 314-993-7080; [www.alivestl.org](http://www.alivestl.org).
- APA of Missouri, Domestic Violence Pet Assistance Program: 314-645-4610; [www.apamo.org](http://www.apamo.org).
- Humane Society of Missouri, education department: 314-951-1578; [www.hsmo.org](http://www.hsmo.org).
- Humane Society of the United States, First Strike Campaign: 1-888-213-0956; [www.hsus.org/ace/15828](http://www.hsus.org/ace/15828).

### Abuse starts with animals

Children who abuse animals seldom stop there. Before killing 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., in 1999, teen gunmen Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris reportedly had both boasted of mutilating animals. Luke Woodham, 16, who shot and killed two of his classmates in Pearl, Miss., in 1997 after stabbing his mother to death, wrote in his journal that he and a friend had beaten, burned and tortured his own dog to death. Michael Carneal, 14, who shot and killed three students during a school prayer meeting in West Paducah, Ky., in 1997, had talked about throwing a cat into a bonfire. Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, Henry Lee Lucas, Richard Speck, David "Son of Sam" Berkowitz and other serial killers all have a history of animal abuse as children.

Copyright © 2004 St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Inc.