Family Violence Looking at the link between family violence and animal abuse

When victims of family violence seek help from your office, do you ask if their pets have been abused as well? Studies have shown that cruelty to animals and domestic violence are closely linked. Cruelty to animals is itself an offense under PC §42.09, and evidence of this crime can be helpful in your prosecution of the family violence case.

With excerpts from articles contributed by Kate Kelly, Assistant County Attorney, Austin, and Valerie Tillery, Family Shelter Program Director, San Angelo

Cruelty to Animals and Human Violence
by Randall Lockwood, Ph.D., published by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

Over the last decade, social scientists and law enforcement agencies have finally begun to examine cruelty to animals as a serious human problem closely linked to child and spouse abuse and other violent crimes.

Most professionals agree that animal abuse is not just the result of a personality flaw in the abuser, but a symptom of a deeply disturbed family. Often families that come to the attention of human services agencies for having children at risk of abuse are also known to animal control or humane society agents in the same community because of problems of animal neglect or abuse. A 1983 survey of 57 pet-owning families under treatment by New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services because of child abuse revealed that, in 99 percent of the families, at least one person in the family had abused animals. In two-thirds of these cases, it was the abusive parent that had killed or injured a pet and children were the abusers in the remaining third.

This and related studies confirm that cruelty to animals can be a sign of a family in need of professional help and/or law enforcement intervention.

The majority of perpetrators of animal cruelty are adolescent or young adult males. Although they come from the entire range of ethnic and financial backgrounds, what common thread states these young boys on the road to animal cruelty, and later subsequent violence against people? Many are simply reflecting the violence they experience at home. Some are convinced of their "badness" by parents and behave in the way they think is expected of them. Others abuse animals to convince themselves that they don't care about the things they often seem to use. In cases where several youths participate, acts of violence against animals may serve as an initiation and a way of rejecting the values of society, as an attempt to shock or offend authority figures, or as retaliation against others.

Cruelty to animals is a crime and should be treated as such. It is also a symptom of disturbed individuals and families, and a predictor of other problems in the making. Court actions against those who abuse animals have been rare, but an increasing number of courts are recognizing that early intervention may be very effective in preventing more serious incidents. Cases of severe or repeated violence against animals demand criminal punishment as well as psychiatric intervention, with less severe incidents at least resulting in referrals for counseling. Ideally such treatment should reach the entire family, not just the abuser. Since animal abuse is often part of a tangled web of family violence, the most effective treatment in severe cases involving children or adolescents may be the removal of the child from the family.

Perhaps the most important approach to the problem of animal cruelty is prevention. Much abuse of animals is motivated by fear and ignorance of animals and an inability to empathize with the needs and feelings of others. Law enforcement officers, especially those who work with animals, can be an excellent aid to humane educators working to instill the knowledge and values that can help prevent children from starting on a destructive path. These efforts cannot undo generations of abuse, but they can be an effective step in
breaking the vicious cycle of family violence which is self-perpetuating from one generation to another.

**Deadly Serious: An FBI Perspective on Animal Cruelty**

Excerpted from an interview with Supervisory Special Agent Alan Brantley that appeared in HSUS News, published by The Humane Society of the U.S. Reprinted with permission.

**BRANTLEY:** A lot of what we do is called threat assessment. If we have a known subject, we want as much information as we can obtain from family members, co-workers, local police, and others before we offer an opinion about this person’s threat level and dangerousness. Something we believe is prominently displayed in the histories of people who are habitually violent is animal abuse. We look not only for a history of animal abuse, torment, or torture, but also for childhood or adolescent acts of violence toward other children and possibly adults and for a history of destructiveness to property....

You can look at cruelty to animals and cruelty to humans as a continuum. We first see people begin to fantasize about these violent actions. If there is escalation among this continuum, we may see acting out against inanimate objects. This may also be manifest in the writings or drawings of the individual affected. The next phase is usually acting out against animals....

You also need to look at the bigger picture. What’s going on at home? What other supports, if any, are in place? How is the child doing in school? Is he drinking or doing drugs?...

Animal cruelty... is not a harmless venting of emotion in a healthy individual; this is a warning sign that this individual is not mentally healthy and needs some sort of intervention. Abusing animals does not dissipate those violent emotions; instead it may fuel them.

**Domestic Violence and Cruelty to Animals**

*by Frank R. Ascione, Ph.D., Utah State University. Presented at the 4th International Conference on Family Violence in July 1995.*

Information about threats to or actual harm of pets is not routinely obtained when women enter shelters for battered partners. This information would be valuable for establishing the prevalence of another form of violence (cruelty to animals) in families where partner battering occurs, and alerting social service agencies that exposure to such animal maltreatment may be an additional source of trauma for women and children. This study examined the prevalence of animal maltreatment in a sample of women, most accompanied by their minor children, seeking shelter from domestic violence.... Results:

- **Nearly three-quarters (71 percent)** of the women with pets reported that their male partner had threatened to hurt or kill and/or had actually hurt or killed one or more of their pets.
- **Twenty-two women had children and 32 percent (N=7) of these women reported that one of their children (three girls and four boys) had hurt or killed a pet or pets.**
- **Eighteen percent of the women with pets reported that concern for their animals’ welfare had prevented them from coming to the shelter sooner.**

The effects of witnessing both parent and pet abuse on children’s mental health warrant more focused research attention.

**Secondary Victims of Violent Homes — Pets**

*by Valerie Tillery. A version of this story appeared in TOUCHING HEARTS from the ICD Family Shelter & Self-Advocacy Center.*

We tend to think that some women are reluctant to leave an abusive situation simply because of economic and personal factors. There are other reasons. Many women will not leave their precious pets with the abusive partner, in fear for the pet’s safety. Many women fail to escape to a safe haven shelter because they fear that their pets will not be accepted there. The abusive partner has been known to threaten his partner to “come back home or the pet will be harmed.” This causes extreme emotional stress on the victim of abuse. Threats to harm the pet results in exactly what the abusive partner desires — emotional manipulation. The victim knows that the safety of herself and the children are a priority; however, her children can also “tug on her apron strings” and beg her to go back home.

Pets have been kicked, stomped on, and inflicted with other means of assault too horrifying to mention. One of our current residents is “Peanuts” who was abused as a kitten. Our shelter has also admitted puppies, parakeets, cockatiels, and fish. However, the snake had to go, and we made alternative living arrangements for “Colorado” the donkey and “Nanny” the goat.

The shelter purchases people food and cat food — a line-item budgeted necessity. Children are encouraged to participate in the animals’ feeding and daily care. It makes for a nice “homey” environment and is good therapy for residents (and staff members). These animals give back what they receive, and so much more.

We have had a case where a little girl told her mom that she would not go to the shelter unless she could bring her cat, placing the mom in an awkward situation. Luckily, the mom was able to explain that their little family would *all* leave the violent home. You can help make this the practice in your local shelter by volunteering to be a foster pet care giver when temporary lodging is needed.