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New Maine Law Shields Animals in Domestic Violence Cases

By Pam Belluck

Susan Walsh told Maine legislators a chilling tale in January. She said she had wanted many times to take her two children and leave her husband, ending a relationship she found frightening and controlling.

But she said she was afraid he would harm the animals on their 32-acre plot called Blessed Be Farm in Ellsworth, Me. In the past, she said in a telephone interview yesterday, he had retaliated against her by running over her blind and deaf border collie named Katydid, shooting two sheep and wringing the necks of her prized turkeys.

“It wasn’t just the cats and the dogs I had, it was the sheep and the chickens – I was terrified for their welfare,” Ms. Walsh, 50, said. “I knew if I were to leave, he wouldn’t hesitate to kill them. He had done it before.”

Experts on domestic violence say accounts like that of Ms. Walsh, who is now divorced, are not unusual. They say many men who abuse wives or girlfriends threaten or harm their animals to coerce or control the women.

To address the problem, Maine’s governor, John Baldacci, signed a bill yesterday that allows animals to be included in protection orders in domestic violence cases.

“Many national studies on victims of domestic violence tell us that their abusers have threatened to kill, threatened to harm or actually harmed their pets as a means of keeping the victim from leaving the relationship,” Mr. Baldacci, a Democrat, said. “With this new law, we hope to help remove another tool for emotional and physical violence used by the abuser to exert power and control over their victims.”

Maine is believed to be the first state with such a law. But the issue has captured attention around the country as police departments, domestic-violence programs, animal protection societies and state officials become increasingly aware of a link between domestic violence and animal abuse.

A new program in Columbus, Ohio, takes animals of victims of domestic violence and places them in a women’s prison, where the inmates care for them. In Nashville, the city gives such pets

a safe haven for up to 30 days. And in St. Louis, the Domestic Violence Pet Assistance Program finds foster homes for the animals.

“There are some batterers who are prone to using coercion and terrorizing tactics who very well know how strongly attached their partner is to the animals in her life,” said Frank A. Ascione, a psychologist at Utah State University. “It’s the dynamic of preying on the love and affection that women often have for the animals in their lives, who may be their only source of solace, their only source of unconditional love.”

In the late 1990’s, Dr. Ascione and colleagues interviewed 101 women in shelters for battered women and 120 women who were not victims of domestic violence.

They found that 54 percent of the battered women said their abusers had harmed or killed their animals, compared with 5 percent of women in the other group. Thirty-four percent of the women whose pets had been both threatened and harmed delayed going to the shelters out of concern for their pets.

In 2002, Dr. Ascione said, he interviewed 42 men in prison who had had violent relationships with women and found that half of them said they had hurt or killed pets.

“Police and prosecutors are well aware of the very close link between threats to pets and threats to family members,” Maine’s public safety commissioner, Michael P. Cantara, said. He cited a 2002 case in which an abusive husband had beaten the family’s cats to death, buried them in the backyard and threatened a similar fate for his wife and children.

“To our horror,” Mr. Cantara said, “that yard was filled with dead Maine pets.”

Karen Days, president of the Columbus Coalition Against Family Violence in Ohio, said of her work at the Columbus city prosecutor’s office: “I had a victim who was in my office, and the prosecutor agreed to issue a warrant for the arrest of her partner. But she was just adamant that she be able to go home first and get her dog. When I asked why, she said, ‘When I left him before, he started mailing me pieces of my cat to tell me if you don’t come back this is what I’m going to continue to do.’”

Ms. Days and others said that battered women without children might be the most attached to their pets. But in homes with children, there are other concerns, Dr. Ascione said.

He said that seeing animals abused made “some kids likely to act out what they may have witnessed,” while others “get even more strongly attached to their pets,” which can be dangerous if the “children start trying to intervene to protect the animals.”

Jill Morris, the public policy director at the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, said that she had not heard of another law like Maine’s but that some judges had begun to include animals in protective orders.

Ms. Days said her organization would be lobbying the Ohio Legislature to make penalties for domestic violence stiffer if animal abuse was involved.

Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the United States, said his organization conducted workshops for police departments, prosecutors and social workers on the problem.

“Oftentimes these situations go on for a long period, say months or years,” Mr. Pacelle said. “We really try to spread the word about this.”

Ariel Sabar contributed reporting from Augusta, Me., for this article, and Katie Zezima from Boston.

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