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New Tack on Family Violence; Animal, Human Agencies Join to Find Solutions

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Several years ago, Karen Days tried persuading a battered woman to leave her abusive husband, but she wouldn't do it.

He had mailed pieces of the woman's mutilated cat to her the one time she had left him. She wasn't about to let that happen to her dog.

"I felt so helpless," said Days, who at the time was working for the Columbus city prosecutor and now heads the Columbus Coalition Against Family Violence.

"I have three cats and a dog. If I was in a violent situation, I don't know that I would have acted any differently. They're my family."

Days hopes a new relationship among animal welfare, criminal justice, family violence, firefighters, and medical and social service officials will spare other abuse victims from facing the same painful choice.

The Capital Area Humane Society is forming a task force to tackle cruelty to both animals and people. Humane Society officers also have started making referrals to Children Services – and vice versa – when investigating cases of abandonment, abuse or neglect.

"Where there is animal cruelty, human violence will follow," said Dan Knapp, executive director of the Capital Area Humane Society in Hilliard. "They are not separate and distinct, but part of a cycle."

Many of the nation's best-known murderers abused animals as children. Albert DeSalvo, who confessed to killing 13 women during the Boston Strangler era, as a youth had placed dogs and cats into crates and shot them with arrows. Serial killer and cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer staked cats to trees and decapitated dogs.

Although most animal abusers don't turn into killers, such violence often is a sign of other problems at home, said Gail Heller, executive director of CHOICES, a local shelter for abused women and children.

A New Jersey study found that animals were mistreated in 88 percent of families referred for child-abuse treatment. A Utah study found that 57 percent of battered women said their pets had

been harmed or killed. One in four of the women said they stayed with an abuser because they feared leaving a pet behind.

About 72 percent of animal abusers nationwide are male. Many are middle-age men who use the threat of violence against family pets as leverage to keep abuse victims quiet, Heller said.

“They may act out of spite or to seek revenge, but it’s all about control,” she said.

Efforts to stamp out animal and human violence have long been linked. Indeed, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals led to the creation of the national child-welfare movement 130 years ago.

Former diplomat and New York philanthropist Henry Bergh founded the animal-cruelty group after he stopped the driver of a coal cart from whipping a horse in 1866.

Eight years later, Bergh realized that a new law he had championed gave animals more protections than children. So he created the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children after winning the release of a 9-year-old girl who had been burned, slashed and whipped by her foster parents.

The movements came to Columbus in 1883 when two schoolteachers came together to protect neglected and abused animals and children. Their organization, which eventually narrowed its focus only to animals as children’s-rights groups formed, evolved into the Capital Area Humane Society.

Mental-health experts frequently use childhood animal abuse as a predictor of adult violence, said John Saros, executive director of Franklin County Children Services.

That’s partly why three-quarters of the states and the District of Columbia have felony-level convictions for serious acts of animal abuse, Knapp said.

Children who have abused animals – often to deal with their own pain by attacking something more vulnerable than they – need to be taught compassion, he said.

The Humane Society of Sonoma County in California, where Knapp worked years ago, does this with Forget Me Not Farm, where abused children learn empathy by caring for plants and farm animals.

He said a similar program or animal-assisted therapy sessions, where children interact with pets during counseling, could be created here.

Days hopes the new task force will consider either creating dual shelters for abused animals and families or a shelter for pets of domestic-violence victims. “More women might then leave their abusers,” Days said.

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