

# Cincinnati Enquirer

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## Pets Need Safe Havens, Too

*Domestic violence victims often fear for animals. Battered women's shelters form unique partnerships.*

By Cindy Schroeder, Enquirer staff writer

COVINGTON – Their pets have been beaten with belts, cut with knives or left to starve. One abuser threw the family dog against a brick wall and threatened to do the same to his estranged wife if she went to its aid.

Studies show that battered women often delay leaving an abusive relationship out of fear for their pets. That's prompting a growing number of partnerships between family protection and animal rights advocates.

"Hurting an animal is a very powerful way of exerting power and control over victims of domestic violence," said Randy Lockwood, vice president for research and educational programs for the Humane Society of the United States. "It's something that police and relatives may not take all that seriously. Research by our organization and others indicates that victims of domestic violence may delay leaving an abusive situation for years because of fear of what might happen to a pet."

Few shelters for battered women are equipped to deal with pets, so a growing number of communities – including two in Greater Cincinnati – have created temporary safe havens for pets. Nationally, there are about 160 pet protection programs, Lockwood said.

To help convince domestic violence victims to seek emergency shelter, the Women's Crisis Center in Northern Kentucky recently expanded its popular pet protection program. Pets of battered women now get protection in confidential "safe houses" for up to 30 days, instead of the 10 previously allowed. Because the average shelter stay for domestic violence victims is about a month, shelter staff hopes this will convince more battered pets' owners to leave abusive situations.

For security reasons, women aren't told who's caring for their pets, but they receive regular reports and photos, said Georgejana Foltz. The former counselor, victims' advocate and animal lover checks on pets once they're in safe houses.

"When women go into the shelter, there are so many things on their plate," said Jackie Zschau, coordinator of the pet protection program. "They're looking for housing. They may be looking

for a job or getting their GED. Or maybe they're trying to get their kids (enrolled in a new) school. Our 10-day pet stay was putting an added pressure on them.”

To publicize the expanded pet protection program – the only one of its kind in Kentucky – Junior, a black Lab who's the unofficial mayor of tiny Rabbit Hash in Boone County, has been drafted as spokespet.

“Junior will be a face for our program,” said Kim Adams, executive director of the Women's Crisis Center. “He'll help get the word out that pet protection is a service we offer for women and children in shelter.”

A few years ago, Sherry Currens, executive director of the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association, invited the local crisis center to make a presentation on its pet protection program at a statewide conference on rape and sexual assault and domestic violence.

“Anytime you can eliminate a barrier to leaving an abusive situation, that's good,” Currens said.

For the past seven years, SPCA Cincinnati has provided temporary shelter to pets of Hamilton County domestic violence victims, typically housing three or four at any given time, said Andy Mahlman, operations manager of SPCA Cincinnati. Since April 2000, the Northern Kentucky crisis center's pet protection program has sheltered about 100 pets – from hamsters to horses.

“Kids were coming in with hamsters in their pockets and carrying kittens,” Adams said. “How do you take that pet away from them and say, ‘No the pet's got to go back’? It's just heartbreaking.”

The Women's Crisis Center recently decided to expand its program when staff noticed more children trying to smuggle “pocket pets,” such as hamsters, mice and gerbils, into emergency shelter.

“Kids tell their pet everything,” Zschau said. “That's their dearest friend, who loves them unconditionally.”

Zschau convinced operators of local “safe houses” to take more animals. But that meant more money was needed for the program that's funded with private donations.

“We've been operating the pet protection program on about \$10,000 a year, which really doesn't even pay for our staff time or gas for our van to transport animals (to and from safe houses),” Adams said. Organizers estimate the cost to expand will be \$20,000.

In exit surveys, women who've sought emergency shelter in Northern Kentucky overwhelmingly say that the crisis center's pet protection program was influential in their decision to leave their abuser.

“I knew that my pet would be safe and that I wasn't losing everything that I loved cause I lost everything else,” one woman wrote.

Zschau said that's a common sentiment.

"A pet protection program removes a barrier to Mom leaving an abusive relationship," she said. "It also helps re-establish the family. Everything else may be ripped away, but they still have each other and their pet."

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## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

### How to help

To make a tax-deductible donation to the Women's Crisis Center's pet protection program serving 13 Northern Kentucky counties, checks can be made out to Women's Crisis Center, 835 Madison Ave., Covington, KY 41011. Send to the attention of Kim Adams, executive director, and note it's for the pet protection program. Gift cards to local pet supply stores also are welcomed. The center also could use an air-conditioned van to transport animals to and from safe havens.

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