

Baltimore Sun

September 7, 2004

Program to Take in Pets Eases One Concern of Domestic Violence Victims; Arundel Shelters Them if Owners Flee Abusers

By Sarah Schaffer

They may have suffered for months, maybe even years, at the hands of their batterers. But victims of domestic violence sometimes give a surprising reason for staying in a dangerous situation, experts say: to protect a beloved pet that may be injured or killed if left behind.

“They want to leave, but what’s stopping them is the inability to ensure that their pets will be OK,” said Jennifer Summers, a spokeswoman for House of Ruth Maryland, a domestic violence prevention organization. “There’s just no place they can send their pet, and there is no place where they can take their pet with them” in many cases.

In an effort to encourage victims who otherwise might be reluctant to get themselves out of harm’s way, the Anne Arundel County animal control division offers temporary “pet safe” shelter for dogs, cats and other companion animals.

Arundel’s Domestic Violence Pet Support Program – the only such program in the Baltimore area operated by a county government – has helped about 10 women since it started in 2001. Frederick County has a similar program.

Most emergency shelters don’t allow pets because of safety, health and space concerns. But Arundel animal shelter Director Tahira S. Thomas believes her county’s initiative has done more than provide free shelter for animals: It has been an integral part of the recovery process for victims of violence.

“It just brings ease to a lot of their minds,” Thomas said of the service. “Their pet is one less thing they have to worry about.”

Domestic violence counselors and law enforcement officials long have struggled to overcome the reluctance of some victims to leave their abusers. This reluctance stems from a variety of complex emotional reasons, including fear of retaliation against them or loved ones.

Studies have shown that as many as 50 percent of pet-owning domestic violence victims delay getting help at least partly to safeguard a pet from retaliatory abuse, said Randall Lockwood of

the Humane Society of the United States. The national organization has publicized the problem, and in recent months has urged shelters to create “pet safe” initiatives.

Some large pet programs are run on a referral basis, in which clients are given information about a program from an abuse counselor or outreach shelter. The pets are placed in a participating animal shelter while the victims are displaced.

Nonprofit humane societies and shelters in less populated areas frequently use a more informal assistance system, putting individuals in contact with temporary foster caretakers.

In Anne Arundel County, local government works with nonprofit domestic violence shelters to promote the program. Clients’ pets can be picked up by animal control officers or taken to the animal control facility in Millersville by the person staying at a domestic violence shelter, Thomas said.

Animals can stay as long as needed - the longest stay to date has been about four months. The shelter’s clients typically are referred by hospital counselors or outreach programs, she said.

Glen Burnie resident Sharon Yutzy was one such client.

After suffering an attack at gunpoint in her apartment in March, the single mother was afraid for her life. She reported the crime to police and moved out, but said she feared another attack from the assailant – someone she knows and who she said is now in custody in connection with another case.

Worries haunted her while she and her daughter rested and recovered safely at a local women’s shelter. Her cats Precious and Hooh Bear – two orange-and-white felines she calls her “babies” – couldn’t stay at the shelter with her, and she wouldn’t risk going back to care for and feed them in the old apartment.

A crisis counselor familiar with the plight of victimized pet owners told Yutzy about the county’s program. After hearing her story, the shelter’s staff agreed to provide a temporary home for the cats at the Millersville animal shelter location.

The assistance was essential, Yutzy said. “I love my animals and I didn’t want to lose them, but I couldn’t imagine giving them up,” she said.

Thomas is proud of the program. “If we help one person, it’s a success. We’re glad to provide (the) service and we feel very honored to have a program that’s helped 10 people,” she said.

For more information on Anne Arundel County’s pet protection program, call 410/222-8900 or visit www.aa county.org/police.

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