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Vets Help Get Pets Out of Abusive Homes

By Mike Wiser, Rockford Register Star

When it comes to issues of domestic violence, dogs and cats don't ordinarily come to mind as likely victims.

But attitudes in that regard are changing. Veterinarians in the Rock River Valley increasingly are being trained to watch for signs of abuse among the pets they treat and the owners of those animals.

Vet Patricia Holm says there's a growing awareness of a possible "connection between animal abuse and abuse in the household."

According to police, antagonists in domestic-abuse cases sometimes mistreat family pets for revenge or to make a point. One animal clinic has been caring for the pets of domestic violence victims.

Victims of Abuse can Get Care for Pets

By Mike Wiser, Rockford Register Star

ROCKFORD – What started with two professionals talking shop at a children's swim meet turned into a one-of-a-kind service in Rockford that is changing the lives of domestic-abuse victims.

For about a year, a Rockford animal clinic has fed and housed pets of domestic-violence victims who seek help through PHASE/WAVE, the Rockford agency that runs an office and shelter for abuse victims.

The pet operation has been decidedly low-key, its efforts known only to a handful of cops, veterinarians and victims. Organizers asked that the clinic's name and location not be revealed out of concern for the safety of clinic staff as well as the animals there.

It has filled a long-term need that, in itself, reveals something about the violent nature of domestic abuse and what abusers will do to keep victims under their control.

"It's just another control technique," said police Sgt. Dorsey Thompson, who heads the department's Domestic Violence Unit.

“They say, ‘If you leave, I’ll do something to the pet,’ and the people have nowhere to take their pet, so they’re less likely to leave.”

Two Friends

Veterinarian Patricia Holm and Rockford police Detective Di Ann Kriegbaum met through a shared passion: watching their boys compete for the same swimming team.

Soon enough, Kriegbaum, an investigator on the department’s domestic-violence unit, began taking her family pet to one of Holm’s clinics.

The detective’s specialty was an area of interest to Holm because, like nurses, teachers and even beauticians, veterinarians are trained to notice signs of abuse in their clients – human and animal – and report their suspicions to authorities.

“It’s been in the last year or two that we as veterinarians have been asked to report things,” Holm said. “We realize now that there is a connection between animal abuse and abuse in the household.”

Such was the case with Justin Pryor, a 22-year-old Rockford man who was sentenced to a year in jail this month after a plea agreement in an animal-cruelty and domestic-battery case.

According to court records, Pryor was in a fight with his girlfriend at her home in the 1100 block of Morgan Street where she lived with her son.

“He stomped on the cat in the household ... and threw it down a flight of stairs despite the sobbing pleas” of his girlfriend’s son, the indictment read.

Thompson recalled the case. “He threatened to kill the cat, and he did,” she said.

The swimming-meet conversations led to workshops and teleconference calls in which Holm and her staff learned more about the signs of domestic abuse.

“A woman or a man might decide to put up with a relationship that’s not good because they do have a pet that they love and they’re concerned what may happen to the pet, so they just stick it out,” Holm said.

“The human-animal bond is an important and powerful thing.”

Thompson said the department’s domestic-violence unit, which became operational in 2001, looked before for a place that could house animals while victims went through treatment but couldn’t find anything locally.

“People wouldn’t want to leave their animals,” she said, “but we didn’t offer any programs here for them, and the shelters couldn’t take them.”

Somewhere between the swimming meets, workshops and phone calls with Kriegbaum, Holm learned about the situation and decided to offer her clinic to pets whose owners needed to change their lives.

“I did think there was a need, and I was hoping that being one of the first clinics that did this, we’d open the doors to a few others,” Holm said. “I also thought that it was a community service that I could provide.”

Patricia Sanderson, animal-health educator at the Greater Rockford Veterinary Medical Association, said Holm’s clinic is the only one in the area that offers such services.

A Unique Program

Since opening in early 2004, Holm’s clinic has cared for three animals whose owners received help from PHASE/WAVE.

Two of the dogs stayed at the clinic for months before they were adopted at the owner’s request. The other dog was returned to its owner after a few weeks.

“This is not something that’s unusual for us to encounter,” said Heather Beaufile, program director at PHASE/WAVE. “It’s not uncommon for people to be at a loss with what to do with their pets when they want to, or are trying to, get out of an abusive situation.”

The cost comes out of Holm’s pocket, and Kriegbaum passed a hat around the police station to raise money for the clinic at Christmas. Feeding and boarding a pet can be expensive.

Depending on the size of the animal, feeding and boarding can cost anywhere from \$8 to \$15 a day. Depending on progress of the owner in PHASE/WAVE, days can turn into weeks and months.

“I can have people come in and say, ‘I would leave, but I don’t have anywhere to take my dog and I don’t have any money to pay for a kennel,’” Thompson said.

“And it’s great for me to be able to say, ‘We can help you with that.’”

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On the Lookout for Domestic Violence

Last fall, the 17th Judicial Circuit Court Family Violence Coordinating Council started a campaign called “Cut it Out,” in which cards, posters and pamphlets were distributed to hair salons in Boone and Winnebago counties. The theory is that women often share personal information with their hairdressers, who could report evidence of domestic violence.

“Cut it Out” cards give this information on what to know about possible abuse.

Signs that a client or someone you know may be abused:

- Bruising in different stages of healing. One sign does not prove abuse.

However, a combination of them, or repeated signs, may indicate abuse.

- Bald spots indicating that hair has been torn out.
- Frequent injuries, especially with unusual explanations.
- Low self-esteem, a sense that she doesn't deserve better treatment.
- Partner always accompanies client to appointments or waits outside in the parking lot.
- Fear of the partner, insecurity about his actions.

You may also notice the following behavior:

- The partner dictates the frequency of her salon visits.
- The partner will not allow her to change her hair color or style.
- The partner is controlling or excessively jealous.

What can you do if a client or someone you know is being abused?

- Believe the person who tells you that she is being abused. Her abuser may have her convinced that she is at fault or that she doesn't deserve better treatment.
- Keep whatever she tells you confidential. Her life may be at stake.
- Gently guide her to find help. Suggest that she contact her local domestic-violence agency or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 800-799-SAFE.
- Don't try to fix the problem for her or become her counselor; your local domestic-violence agency is staffed with trained personnel to counsel victims and to help ensure their safety.

Domestic Violence and Pet Cruelty

A small study of women staying at a shelter in Utah found that abuse of companion animals is common in domestic-abuse situations.

The 1997 study, done by Frank R. Ascione, Claudia V. Weber and David S. Wood of Utah State University, found that:

- 74 percent of the 38 women staying at the shelter had a pet at the time or in the past year.

- Of these women, 71 percent indicated that their boyfriends or husbands had either threatened harm to their animals or had engaged in actual maltreatment and/or killing of an animal.
- 18 percent of the women delayed leaving their abusers because of concern for their pets' safety.

A 1998 follow-up study by Ascione found that of 101 battered women:

- 70 percent said their abusers had threatened or actually harmed their pets.
- 54 percent reported that their abusers actually killed their pets.
- 25 percent delayed leaving their abusers because of concern for their pets' safety.

www.vachss.com/guest_dispatches/ascione_1.html; www.parkc.org/domestic.htm

Whom to Call

For more information on the program or to donate items such as food or money to ensure that it continues to operate, call PHASE/WAVE at 815-962-6102.

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