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- Melissa Wuerch, University of Regina— [wuerch2m@uregina.ca](mailto:wuerch2m@uregina.ca)
- Crystal Giesbrecht, Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS)—[paths.research@sasktel.net](mailto:paths.research@sasktel.net)

## **Examining the Relationship Between Intimate Partner Violence and Concern for Animal Care and Safekeeping**

### **Abstract**

The current study examined the knowledge and experience of animal welfare and human service providers in urban and rural communities of Saskatchewan, Canada. Nine exploratory qualitative interviews were conducted to gather a more in-depth understanding of whether the concern for animal care and safekeeping impacts the decision to leave situations of intimate partner violence. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by four questions, which were designed, reviewed, and revised based on feedback from a community-based research team. Thematic analysis highlighted important findings, allowing for the generation of suggestions for improvement of current supports and services offered. The current study findings suggest that concern for animal care and safekeeping creates significant barriers regarding the decision to leave situations of intimate partner violence and abuse, warranting further research to inform support services and resources within a Canadian context.

## **Examining the Relationship Between Intimate Partner Violence and Concern for Animal Care and Safekeeping**

Research examining the barriers to accessing services in relation to intimate partner violence (IPV) has increased in recent years. While the current investigations are vital to improve service effectiveness, there continues to be a scarcity of research examining whether the concern for animal care and safe-keeping impacts the decision to leave situations of IPV. Limited research to date has examined the challenges associated with living in rural communities within Saskatchewan, Canada. Furthermore, to our knowledge, no studies have explored the relationship between concern for animal care and safe-keeping and living in rural communities of Saskatchewan, Canada, and if these circumstances impact the decision survivors of IPV make when choosing whether to seek shelter support. Therefore, future research is well warranted to explore the barriers that survivors of IPV living in rural regions face, which will further highlight the need for accessible resources and services, and is the first step to implementing promising practices within a geographically unique Canadian context.

### **Literature Review**

Within Canada, Saskatchewan has the highest prevalence rate of IPV among all the provinces (765 per 100,000 population) and when compared with the national average (341 per 100,000 population). Of the 1,033,381 individuals who live in Saskatchewan, 33% live in rural or remote areas (Statistics Canada, 2011a). Among the 103,000 women admitted to domestic violence shelters in Canada each year (Statistics Canada, 2011b), approximately 2,349 stay at shelters in Saskatchewan (Statistics Canada, 2013). Furthermore, approximately 78% of IPV cases are not reported to police, suggesting that prevalence rates are much higher (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2015). These high prevalence rates illustrate the importance of further examining the experiences of women IPV survivors within rural Saskatchewan communities.

Intimate partners, however, are not the only targets of violence and abuse. Phil Arkow (2003), coordinator of the National Link Coalition, asserts, "When animals are abused, people are at risk. When people are abused, animals are at risk" (p. 1). This quote illustrates the devastating reality that IPV and animal abuse rarely occur in isolation from one another (Animal Protection Services of Saskatchewan [APSS], 2016; Ascione, 2000; Levitt, Hoffer, & Loper, 2016; Phillips, 2015). In particular, research shows that perpetrators of violence target companion animals or livestock as a method of control or revenge over their human victims (APSS, 2016; Ascione, 2000; Phillips, 2015). Companion animals are typically smaller animals, such as cats, dogs, birds, gerbils, or fish. Livestock are considered to be animals that are raised for income, food, or other uses, such as cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, or poultry.

In Saskatchewan, Canada, the Saskatchewan Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), an organization that promotes the humane treatment of animals, was responsible for investigating suspected animal abuse of companion animals and livestock up until April 2015 (Saskatchewan SPCA, 2014). Investigations are now conducted by APSS, who also continue to enforce Saskatchewan's Animal Protection Act (APSS, 2016). In general, they highlight two types of animal abuse: neglect and physical abuse. Neglect involves deliberately or

nondeliberately refusing treatment to injured or sick animals, or the abandonment of animals (APSS, 2016; Lockwood & Arkow, 2016). According to Lockwood and Arkow (2016), this is the most common type of animal abuse.

While neglect is cited as the most common type of animal abuse, physical abuse of animals is more commonly associated with IPV cases (Ascione et al., 2007; Lockwood & Arkow, 2016). Physical abuse includes deliberately hitting, throwing, or otherwise injuring companion animals or livestock (APSS, 2016; Lockwood & Arkow, 2016). Although it is difficult to ascertain the prevalence of animal abuse in Saskatchewan, during the 2013/2014 fiscal year, 735 new case files were opened in response to suspected animal cruelty (Saskatchewan SPCA, 2014). This figure, however, does not include investigations handled by local SPCAs and humane societies, nor does it include investigations handled by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and municipal police forces. Therefore, much like incidents of IPV, prevalence rates for animal abuse are likely much higher.

To combat the high prevalence rates of animal abuse and IPV within Saskatchewan, human service providers, animal welfare providers, and stakeholders emphasize the importance of collaboration. This means establishing partnerships, enhancing education, and facilitating solutions for prevention and intervention are required to improve support for individuals and animals experiencing violence and abuse. The Saskatchewan SPCA and Saskatchewan Towards Offering Partnership Solutions (STOPS) to Violence are the first organizations in Saskatchewan to establish such a partnership. Saskatchewan SPCA, established in 1928, is a registered charitable organization that helps to prevent animal abuse (Saskatchewan SPCA, 2016).

Similarly, STOPS to Violence, established in 1992, is a provincial organization dedicated to supporting collaborations with individuals, communities, organizations, and governments (STOPS to Violence, 2016). The established partnership between these organizations led to the creation of a community-based research team, including representatives from the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Social Services, the Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS), and the University of Regina. This partnership seeks to enhance awareness of the relationship between IPV and animal abuse, with the long-term hope of developing effective IPV and animal abuse support services within a Saskatchewan context. As reports of animal abuse in Canada are on the rise, the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies has increased sentences and modified animal abuse laws (Canadian Federation of Humane Societies, 2015). Nevertheless, animal abuse still occurs and can impact the likelihood of IPV survivors seeking refuge (Ascione, 2000; Ascione et al., 2007; Flynn, 2000; Hartman, Hageman, Williams, & Ascione, 2015; Tiplady, Walsh, & Phillips, 2012). For instance, concern for the care and safekeeping of animals can delay or prevent IPV survivors from seeking refuge at shelters. Ascione (2000) found this to be true for up to 40% of IPV survivors. This is often because companion animals provide invaluable emotional support (Ascione et al., 2007; Flynn, 2000; Phillips, 2015). Approximately 71% of those who reported not seeking refuge from IPV reported that their perpetrator exerted or threatened abuse to a companion animal, through such methods as threat, injury, or killing (Ascione, Weber, & Wood, 1997). Women staying in shelters are also found to be 4 times more likely to indicate that their partner had threatened to harm a companion animal and 11 times more likely to report that their partner had hurt or killed a companion animal compared with women not experiencing IPV (Ascione et al., 2007).

Furthermore, many cases of IPV include children in addition to companion animals or livestock. Investigations into these cases have identified instances of child maltreatment (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009) and problematic behavioral patterns (Ascione, 1998; Becker, Stuewig, Herrera, & McCloskey, 2004; Currie, 2006). This is concerning because children exposed to IPV relationships growing up often exert similar violent behaviors when they are older, suggesting a cyclical pattern (Ascione, 1998; Currie, 2006; Thompson & Gullone, 2006).

Overall, these findings demonstrate the importance of housing IPV survivors and their companion animals together in shelters. While promising practices and initiatives are starting to develop, such as the first global initiative titled Sheltering Animals & Families Together (SAF-T; Phillips, 2015), there are currently no options and a significant lack of research within rural and remote areas of Saskatchewan. To fill this identified gap, the current study uniquely explores how the concern for animal care and safekeeping impacts the decision of whether to seek refuge for survivors of IPV living in urban and rural communities of Saskatchewan. The present study also offers promising recommendations for other jurisdictions to ensure that when developing intervention models, these meet the unique needs of the province.

## **Method**

### **Participant Recruitment**

Following the completion of online quantitative questionnaires assessing the experiences of 39 animal welfare and 58 human service representatives in urban and rural regions of Saskatchewan, Canada, as part of a larger community-based research project, researchers determined that it would be beneficial to conduct further exploratory qualitative interviews with a subsample of participants. This was viewed as beneficial to gather a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between IPV, animal abuse, and concern for animal care. The criteria utilized to determine which representatives would be contacted to participate in the qualitative interviews included years of work experience, direct work experience with individuals subjected to violence in intimate partner relationships, experience with issues related to animal care and safekeeping, knowledge of short- and long-term options for animal care and safekeeping within their community, and location. Using the established criteria, 12 participants were contacted using a scripted recruitment email describing the option to participate in a qualitative interview. Interest was expressed by nine participants.

### **Data Collection**

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Regina Research Ethics Board. Qualitative interviews were conducted via telephone at a time convenient for each participant. Interviews ranged from 20 to 30 min, with all nine participants receiving an explanation of informed consent. No monetary compensation was given. Individuals expressed motivation to share information, insight, and experiences, with the hope that their stories would lead to change. Four main questions were utilized for the qualitative interviews.

Participants were asked about their experiences with providing support in relation to IPV and animal safekeeping, key obstacles to providing support services, the greatest need of their organization, and the first step to improving their service. These questions were designed, reviewed, and revised based on feedback from the community-based research team. The team

consisted of animal welfare and human service representatives knowledgeable of the current gaps within Saskatchewan, which parallels current gaps within Canada. As the interviews were semi-structured, additional questions were asked as information was provided.

Through gathering information from animal welfare and human service representatives, a wealth of knowledge and experience was obtained to increase the understanding of IPV, animal abuse, and animal safekeeping, allowing for the generation of suggestions for improvement of current supports and services offered. Of importance to note is that findings from the current project represent a small sample of service providers within Saskatchewan, Canada. As the current sample was not and could not be randomly selected, findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of Saskatchewan. However, similar experiences arose among participants, suggesting that these findings are valid and meaningful.

### **Participant Characteristics**

A total of nine female participants were involved in the qualitative interviews. Five participants represented human service agencies, including domestic violence shelter services ( $n = 4, 44.4\%$ ) and domestic violence victim services ( $n = 1, 11.1\%$ ). Four participants represented animal welfare agencies, including SPCAs and humane societies ( $n = 2, 22.2\%$ ), and veterinarian's ( $n = 2, 22.2\%$ ). Years in current employment position ranged from 0 to 20 or more years. Due to the geographical diversity of Saskatchewan, of the nine participants, five represented urban regions ( $n = 5, 55.6\%$ ) and four represented rural regions ( $n = 4, 44.4\%$ ). Characteristics of each participant are outlined in Table 1. Participant numbers included in Table 1 correspond to the quotes selected to represent the current research findings.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

The qualitative interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and then uploaded to a password-protected computer. Following this, the recorded interviews were transcribed by a trained graduate student in clinical psychology. The graduate student reviewed each transcript and errors were corrected where necessary. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the themes discussed within each interview, thematic analysis was chosen as the method of analysis. Recommendations and guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed.

## **Results**

The present authors acknowledge that the information shared is not verified; however, as the service providers involved in this research project varied in years of professional knowledge and experience, it is thought that their quotations and statements are an accurate reflection of the challenges faced when supporting survivors of IPV who present with concerns regarding animal care and safekeeping. We also acknowledge that service providers are often offering the best support possible in the face of limited resources and funding. The hope is that through this research, we are able to move forward with innovative ways to increase support for individuals and animals experiencing violence and abuse in urban and rural communities.

## Major Themes

Based on thematic analysis, there were a number of important themes that emerged regarding IPV and animal safekeeping. These themes are discussed in relation to two overarching concepts: (a) identified issues and challenges and (b) suggestions for improvement and next steps.

### Identified Issues and Challenges

*Animal abuse as an indicator of other abuse.* Service providers described a noticeable association between incidents of animal abuse occurring in tandem with other forms of abuse. One participant described a situation of animal abuse occurring, with the suspicion of additional abuse occurring within the home. Moreover, one participant reflected on an incident where a child was exposed to a severely abusive household. This child started to exhibit strange and harmful behavior toward animals. She speculated that this child may have modeled abusive behavior based on his experiences within the home.

I had a family come in with their small breed. They had two or three kids . . . little kids. I don't even really know exactly what happened, the oldest child said something and the father slapped her across her face and then sent the kids to the car. So then I contacted the police. From talking to the person I talked to, it sounded like these people were already on their radar so to speak. That really made me think that there is potentially or definitely violence in this household. (Participant 6)

A young boy, he was about three. He told me about biting the heads of his turtles off . . . his home was extremely violent. I can't say that he was physically hurt, but the things going on in the house were dramatically strange. (Participant 7)

*Animals provide emotional comfort.* Service providers discussed the importance of animals offering a sense of emotional comfort and security for individuals leaving abusive situations, in addition to children that may be involved. Participants noted that women and children are often attached to their animals, and in most situations, these animals provide emotional support and enhance coping in situations filled with stress and turmoil. In some circumstances, animals are referred to as family members.

Quite often family pets have to be left behind when the woman and children leave. That becomes an issue in that the children are upset with leaving them because sometimes they're their security blanket type thing. (Participant 3)  
For some people, the pet is very, a very real emotional support to them, is something that provides them comfort. They would rather not have their pet go into the program because they can't see the pet while it's in there. (Participant 4)

*Animals used as method of control.* Using animals as a method of control was discussed by service providers. Stories were told regarding the exertion of control over individuals and children through threats to harm or kill animals. The exertion of control discussed was often used to prevent individuals from fleeing their home to seek safety.

We have had situations where women have told us that during a severe and violent attack on them, the perpetrator has also hit their dog or strangled their cat when they were present, as a means of controlling and threatening them, and saying “This is your cat but it could be you.”

(Participant 3)

I’ve seen partners use pets either to get to the kids or to get to mom. Or just to the woman herself because legally, pets are considered property right. They’re not actually seen as a family member or as a companion. (Participant 8)

*Accessing domestic violence shelter services.* When considering the emotional connection and attachment that individuals and animals share, especially during situations of violence and abuse, service providers described the difficult nature of making the decision of whether to seek safety and refuge through shelter services. Participants reflected that often individuals will not access shelter services due to the inability to find temporary care for animals. If temporary care is found, survivors may not be able to see their animals while the animals are in care, which becomes problematic.

There have been instances where I know people have refused or turned down coming into the shelter because they weren’t able to take the pet out of the home, they weren’t able to leave or make sure the pet was safe, so they chose to stay in the home rather than come into shelter.

(Participant 4)

*Fear of negative consequences to animals.* When making the decision of whether to access domestic violence shelter support and services, participants indicated that individuals will often decide not to access shelter care, for fear that something negative may happen to their animals. One participant reported that although animal welfare agencies may be able to provide temporary care for animal safekeeping, these agencies are not exempt from negative situations that may arise. If something does happen to an animal while the animal is in care, this creates an increased amount of stress and emotional turmoil for survivors of violence and abuse. In addition, if the only option is for animals to be left with the perpetrator, service providers discussed that individuals may put themselves in dangerous situations to ensure that their animals are being properly taken care of.

You put a strange animal in a strange home and they may run away. You do your best to not, but the bottom line is sometimes that happens. (Participant 2)

A lady had to leave the farm and come here for safety reasons. The RCMP had brought her here. But she felt she needed to go out and feed and water the animals every day, because if she didn't, her partner wouldn't. So she was exposing herself to the danger over and over every day by having to go feed and water them. And she felt she needed to do that because that was her income. (Participant 3)

*Accessing safekeeping programs for animals.* When a survivor of violence makes the decision to access temporary care for their animal, the process of accessing animal welfare support is a concern. Participants indicated that coordinating transportation of the animal, such as picking an appropriate time, timely response, and ensuring the safety of everyone involved, is difficult to manage during this process. In addition, minimal options are available if animal safekeeping is needed after-hours, which creates further complications to seeking safety. Survivors of IPV will often flee when their situation worsens and in the spur of the moment, which will likely not involve prior planning. One participant expressed frustration around the planning process and filling out the paperwork for accessing animal safekeeping programs, as it is often cumbersome and timely.

In my experience, it has been weeks to find a foster parent and that's only if they do. There have been cases where they just don't and then the woman gets frustrated and goes back. Or they're trying to rush into finding housing so they can have their animals, or know that their animals are safe. (Participant 8)

Lots of this stuff is in the middle of the night . . . it's unlikely that people spend lots of time planning in those situations. As far as the really hard core abuse situations, those people leave because it's not safe, and that's usually decisions that come on the tail end of a fight . . . not a month of planning. (Participant 9)

*Animal safekeeping is short-term.* Service providers noted that if the decision is made to access animal safekeeping, the options available are often short-term. This creates additional barriers, as individuals fleeing violence and abuse may not know the exact amount of time they will need for their animals to be in care or they will have no other options once the temporary short-term care limit is maximized. Limited options in regard to animal safekeeping further impacts the decision of whether or not to leave an abusive situation. In addition, the amount of time that temporary care is available for animals is largely dependent on situational factors, such as amount of space and the availability of animal foster homes. Service providers reported that they often try to

accommodate individuals fleeing violence to the best of their ability, but limited resources, space, and funding are influential factors.

The issue with our program is that it is geared to be very short-term. We're contacted because they're going into a shelter or a transitional place and animals are not allowed in those places, which gets us into a pickle because they're looking for short-term care for their animals that are going into the weeks and the months. That's difficult for us to accommodate. (Participant 1)

Just the space and time thing. Like certainly for a short period of time we could shelter an animal or two. But for longer term shelter, it would be difficult I guess . . . maybe two or three pets, I mean I'm sure we could accommodate that. But more than that, it might be difficult just based on space. (Participant 6)

*Limited financial resources for safekeeping options.* A significant barrier that was discussed among service providers was the lack of financial resources available for survivors of IPV if costs are associated with programs and services for animal care and safekeeping. The option of kennels and boarding facilities was discussed for housing companion animals and larger animals; however, these alternatives often involve incurred costs that are not realistic for individuals fleeing abusive situations.

A woman who was experiencing domestic violence, the police responded and she had I believe two dogs at the time . . . and when she was done working with the police that day, she needed to, she wanted to go get them but she didn't have the money the shelter was requiring. When the RCMP take dogs there, I guess then there is a charge to the owner and she didn't have the money. (Participant 5)

All these people in rural Saskatchewan, they're also looking at do they have the means. Because boarding horses is such an expensive situation that for most people, it's not even an option. So either they have to leave without, or they have to try and find a family member or friend to move some stuff to. (Participant 9)

*Records and paperwork for animals.* Several participants indicated that the lack of available or up-to-date paperwork or vaccination records is a safety concern when individuals are accessing animal safekeeping programs. For some programs, proving ownership of animals is a determining factor for whether animals can be removed from the home. However, one participant described that among veterinary clinics, when an animal is brought in, there is often an assumption that the person is the owner, as ownership is hard to prove otherwise. Overall,

legal issues, safety concerns, cases not being “straight forward,” and financial issues if vaccinations are required were stated as concerns that need to be taken into consideration.

Ownership is always very hard to prove. I think people want to think that there’s some magical thing about ownership of a pet, but the reality is, whoever brings the pet to us, we have no other way of knowing. (Participant 6)

If they don’t personally have the paperwork for the critter, are we stealing it? Because the thing is, if they don’t load it . . . like I prefer that they load their own stuff because most of the time, that’s a bad scenario. And if you have a ticked off spouse, you don’t want somebody coming with the RCMP and saying “you stole my horses.” The thing is that, it either has to be something where it’s very, very clearly their animal or they have the paperwork for it or to that affect. (Participant 9)

*Limited options in rural areas.* In addition to the above-mentioned barriers, rural areas face several unique limitations in terms of available resources. Service providers stated that animal safekeeping programs and practices within rural regions are minimal; so often times, survivors of IPV are left to rely on informal support from family and friends. In addition, programs and services that are available within urban regions are not accessible to individuals living in rural communities. One participant provided information regarding current rental accommodations in her rural community, stating that to her knowledge, rental options that accept animals are essentially nonexistent.

It doesn’t seem like the program is very well known within the community. Our shelter serves a very large area within Saskatchewan, all the way to [rural region]. But the [animal welfare] program only serves people who are living in [urban region], so that’s a very small area compared to what we serve. (Participant 8)

It really comes down to who do you know. And if you find the right person that will help you, then score. I’m not saying they’re not out there, there are good people everywhere, but when you hit that level of a high stress situation, it’s finding the right person quickly. (Participant 9)

*Confidentiality concerns in rural areas.* Confidentiality was discussed as a concern among rural communities. This was discussed in terms of animal foster homes, where ensuring the individual remains anonymous may be difficult due to rural communities being small and aware of current happenings. Ensuring confidentiality for safety reasons was mentioned.

. . . now in days everyone wants to foster, it's a big cool thing to do. Everybody seems to brag about it . . . a foster home has to be completely confidential. Whether they have a made-up story of "Oh my aunt is in the hospital and I'm looking after her dog" or whatever the case may be, the importance of screening a foster home and making sure they understand the safety, both for themselves, the animal, and the person staying in the shelter. It's a small community, everybody knows everybody. (Participant 2)

*Limited safekeeping options for larger animals.* Similar to limited options being available in rural regions, options for the care of larger animals when individuals are seeking safety and support is problematic. If temporary care for larger animals is found and arranged, issues surrounding transportation may create problems.

When it comes to women that are coming from rural areas and say if they have a farm background, there's pretty much nothing for livestock. And then that causes tons of problems. I had one client where after she left, she couldn't get onto social assistance because it was considered an asset for her. But at the same time, when she was trying to go for the division of property, her partner was claiming that she had abandoned everything and shouldn't have a right to it. Still to this day, she is trying to fight that. It's been about three years. (Participant 8)

It's not just let's find a place, it's how do we get it out of there? (Participant 9)

*Financial livelihood dependent on larger animals.* The interviewees reported that adding to the limited safekeeping options for larger animals, survivors of IPV often feel that their hands are tied in terms of their financial sustainability. Individuals living in rural areas are often dependent on livestock as their means of financial security and livelihood. When leaving an abusive situation, the division of assets and property significantly impacts the decision of whether to leave. Participants described that individuals will often stay in abusive situations due to the complexities associated with the division of assets.

The lady and her children left the farm and she disclosed that her husband was very very violent towards the cattle. He would whip them and beat them unmercifully if they didn't follow his commands. She had concerns that if the SPCA stepped in, then there could be a problem with the sale of the cattle and that was her only source of income. (Participant 3)

And then it also comes up in terms of division of assets and who actually owns the livestock, that sort of thing. I know for women who have come in off the farm, this has been a particular concern for them. (Participant 4)

In one case specifically it prevented her from leaving the relationship. She lived in a rural area . . . and it was her responsibility to care for the animals. If she didn't, there would also be the financial problems. (Participant 4)

*Lack of awareness of available resources.* Service providers indicated that a current gap affecting their ability to support individuals with concern for animal care and safekeeping is a lack of awareness regarding available resources, services, and programs within the community. Creating a resource book of available options was noted.

What is the greatest need? I'm thinking awareness, knowledge out there about some strategies you can take so that your animals are safe . . . just knowing that there are services available or to contact these numbers to advice. (Participant 7)

### **Suggestions for Improvement and Next Steps**

*On-site support and animal safekeeping.* Service providers were asked what their key obstacles were at the moment to providing their respective service. Two participants reflected that in a "perfect world," services to ensure support and safety would not be needed. Following this, participants described the option of offering a domestic violence shelter with on-site animal care and support. It was noted that this living situation may create further issues that would need to be dealt with during the developmental phase.

In a perfect world, I think the shelters and those places would allow people to have pets. That's their main sort of, their comfort. [Women] spend a lot of time worrying and stressing about what's going to happen to their animals. And ultimately, I would say a large portion of people end up surrendering them because they just have no other options. (Participant 1)

In a perfect world we wouldn't have to. I know that there are some shelters that are starting to bring animals into the shelter. I don't actually see that . . . I think maybe in a perfect world it might be nice, but I think it can create a bunch of other issues too. I mean, you're already living communal and now you have communal animals, and then they don't always get along and all that stuff. (Participant 7)

*Streamlining access to animal safekeeping program.* Participants suggested that streamlining the paperwork process involved in securing animal safekeeping programs and placements would be beneficial, as this may improve accessibility and timely response.

I think accessibility is a key thing to it in terms of just streamlining the process of accessing the program. There's a lot of paperwork that has to be done and a whole referral service, that kind of thing. So simplifying that process would really make a difference. Also the whole part of having to prove ownership, and I don't know what could be changed within that. I understand that there's laws and stuff like that, but if there's something that could be done within that situation to make it easier for the woman to remove the pet from the home. (Participant 4)

The very first thing to be addressed would be, more on the procedural side of the [animal welfare program], that it takes so long to get the whole process started and to find a foster parent or a place for the animals to go. (Participant 8)

*More programming.* Developing and implementing more program options was suggested. Ensuring that these programs offer financially realistic and appropriate resources would be vital moving forward. Finding creative ways to increase the amount of space, foster families, and volunteer capacity was noted.

What is the greatest need? I think there needs to be more programming to assist them. Like as far as I know, we're the only ones who have any sort of program to help people with temporarily housing their animals. And I mean, there's plenty of rescues or boarding facilities, things of that nature, but generally these people don't have the funds to be able to access those. (Participant 1)

Even if there was something in the community that was a little less formal. I know there is like [volunteer-run animal welfare charity], but to my knowledge, it's not a place, like they're trying to adopt out cats. But even an organization that would be able to say "For a woman fleeing domestic violence, she can drop her cat off for up to six weeks," or something like that. (Participant 8)

*Creating partnerships.* Service providers discussed the importance of inter-agency collaboration when supporting survivors of IPV when concern is raised regarding animal safekeeping. Creating innovative partnerships with community organizations was suggested. For instance, one participant discussed the recent partnership established between veterinary services and social work to enhance support for individuals, such as by providing counseling to a veterinarian or to a

family dealing with the passing of a beloved animal. This innovative partnership indicates that thinking outside the box in regard to interagency partnerships can lead to significant progress and positive change.

We're limited by the number of foster families that we have and we're limited by the size of our facility and all sorts of things. We help as many people as we can, but if there were other agencies that could help in some way, that would be huge. Like even hotels, there's not that many pet friendly hotels. (Participant 1)

That's probably something that would help, if I was to contact the animal shelter and talk about a plan for how we could work together. (Participant 5)

*Education and awareness of available resources.* Developing and implementing education and training programs to promote awareness of support services available for both service providers and survivors in regard to IPV and animal safekeeping was suggested. Increasing awareness of options that are available is imperative moving forward. One participant discussed the possibility of creating a provincial registry of available services.

Well that's good information because I didn't really know that that was available. It's good to talk to you because it makes me think more about what I would maybe do in that scenario. Because sometimes if you haven't thought about it ahead, it's hard to decide and do in the moment. (Participant 6)

If I was queen of the world to be honest, I would have some sort of listing shelter wise where they have lists of people that will just take your pet and keep them until you're ready to come back for your pet, or some listing or some rental directory of rental places that accept pets. (Participant 9)

## **Conclusion**

The current study presents qualitative findings from knowledgeable service providers regarding the relationship between IPV and concern for animal care and safekeeping within a Canadian context. Several consistent experiences emerged. First, service providers from both domestic violence and animal welfare organizations confirmed that concern for the safety of companion animals and livestock is a significant barrier to individuals leaving situations of IPV, which is consistent with previous research (Ascione et al., 2007; Flynn, 2000; Hartman et al., 2015). Through the qualitative interviews, it was discovered that while some networks provide safekeeping of animals for individuals experiencing violence and abuse, services are not consistent across regions and differ significantly in rural and urban settings. Importantly,

responses shared by participants also highlighted a number of recommendations for providing a more effective response when individuals attempting to leave violent relationships are in need of safekeeping for their animals.

At present, the current research findings suggest that both animal welfare and human service providers feel ill-equipped to deal properly with situations where IPV results in a need for animal safekeeping. When participants were asked what would improve their ability to respond to the need for animal safekeeping in situations of IPV, suggestions from human and animal service providers fit three common themes—establishing partnerships and training, policy change, and expanding infrastructure.

Both types of service responders mentioned the importance of establishing partnerships and expressed interest in working more closely with each other. Participants stated that partnerships need to be reliable, consistent, and cooperative, with the goal of creating more efficient responses to requests for animal safekeeping. Establishing dependable partnerships includes increasing the number of well-trained volunteers to provide assistance. Also mentioned was the need to develop formal agreements between animal welfare and human service providers. Service providers reflected a need to increase their knowledge of what human services, animal welfare, and safekeeping services are available. More information and education on the link between IPV and animal safekeeping was discussed as imperative.

There was an expressed need for policy change to improve support services. The necessary changes included ensuring anonymity of animal foster homes, implementing measures to ensure the safety of staff members and volunteers, establishing a structured referral process for animal care and safe-keeping, and developing formal agreements to handle livestock safekeeping requests. In addition, improved and expanded infrastructure was mentioned as imperative for increasing support capacity, indicating a need for funding to improve response. These recommendations included expanding domestic violence shelter space to include a space for (companion) animals either within the shelter itself or a nearby building, creating facilities to house livestock when needed in situations of interpersonal violence, finding or creating additional placement options for animal safekeeping, and creating emergency funding to help individuals fleeing IPV to cover transportation, boarding, and vaccination costs for animals. The suggestions provided are of great value to the organizations participating in the current project, as they provide guidance for putting this research into action. Not only do these suggestions provide direction for actions that can be undertaken immediately to work toward a more effective response when animal safekeeping is needed in situations of IPV, but they also offer areas in which to expand further discussion and research with service providers.

### **Research Challenges and Limitations**

Some challenges were encountered while carrying out the present study. First, when contacting representatives from various agencies with a request for their participation in the current research, it became apparent that some individuals were unaware of the association between IPV and animal safekeeping. Offering additional information regarding the connection between these two issues may have resulted in increased participation, as well as participants being better

informed before participating. Second, as noted above, the findings from this study represent a sample of service providers within urban and rural regions of Saskatchewan, Canada. As the current sample was not and could not be randomly selected, findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of Saskatchewan. However, as similar experiences and themes arose among all participants, it is thought that the presented results are valid and provided vital information for animal welfare and human services agencies. Third, the findings from the current study were not verified as accurate or valid; however, as the service providers interviewed varied in years of professional knowledge and experience, it is thought that their quotations and statements are an accurate reflection of the challenges faced in relation to leaving situations of violence when faced with concern for animal safety.

In light of the research challenges, a strength is that this research has raised awareness of the relationship between IPV and concern for animal safekeeping. This awareness is the first step toward engaging animal and human service providers to participate in more discussion, training, and collaboration toward establishing partnerships and protocols, which will help to ensure a more effective response toward keeping both humans and animals safe from violence. Overall, a collaborative spirit among animal welfare agencies and human service organizations is imperative, which will lead to positive change for individuals and the community at large.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

One of the first actions to be undertaken stemming from this research is to assist animal welfare and human service providers by providing training on IPV and animal safekeeping. Staff at domestic violence shelters and counseling agencies have long recognized that women often do not leave abusive situations because they are unwilling to leave their animals behind, often due to fear for the animals' lives. Despite this recognition, this research demonstrated that animal welfare and human service providers rarely communicate with each other and are unaware of the services that each other can provide. As well, while service providers are aware that ownership of animals often prevents women from leaving abusive situations, the results demonstrate that this issue is complex and multifaceted, and training and education are needed on a range of topics. These areas include, for example, animal abuse as an indicator of IPV, legal issues around ownership, services and options that are available in the local area, and appropriate interventions for different types of animals, such as companion animals, service animals, and livestock. It is also evident that more education on the association between IPV, animal abuse, and animal safekeeping is needed. For instance, by providing education to service providers, this may enhance the ability of animal welfare staff who respond to situations of animal abuse to assess if humans are also at risk, and if so, how to respond appropriately.

Another action arising from this research will be to assist animal welfare and human service agencies to form mutually beneficial partnerships, with the goal of supporting individuals experiencing IPV to safely exit violent relationships with access to appropriate animal safekeeping options. Investigating what services are available in different regions and putting this information into a format that can be disseminated widely will serve two functions. First, this is an initial step toward connecting animal and human service providers and ensuring that all staff working in areas where they may encounter a need for animal safekeeping related to IPV

have up-to-date information on available options. Second, collecting this information will demonstrate where gaps in services appear and, thus, can serve as a starting point for discussions with service providers about how partnerships can be formed to fill these gaps.

Some changes to policy, such as improving referral processes and increasing safety measures, could be implemented with minimal time and financial cost. An important policy area to be addressed surrounds issues of confidentiality and information sharing, when cross-reporting or involvement from both animal welfare and human service (domestic violence or child protection) services may be needed. Connecting animal welfare and human service providers to discuss these issues and draft policies to ensure a timely response is vital.

Many of the suggestions from respondents center on improving service structures, such as expanding animal shelter space or making domestic violence shelters pet-friendly. An example of a successful pet-friendly domestic violence shelter is Noah's Animal House (2015) based in Las Vegas, Nevada. These suggestions require increased funding, which is a constant reality among community-based organizations. Thus, the need for creative solutions is highlighted. Organizations may consider assisting in the development of these strategies by bringing together service providers from both animal welfare and domestic violence services for training and education on the issue, discovering the resources that are available for different types of animal safe-keeping and where gaps exist, and helping to facilitate communication and efficacious partnerships. Once solid working relationships are established, a potential next step could be to investigate possible policy changes and infrastructure improvements. Continued research assessing IPV and animal safekeeping is warranted.

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## Authors

**Melissa A. Wuerch**—University of Regina

**Crystal J. Giesbrecht**— Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS)

**Jill A. B. Price**—University of Regina

**Tracy Knutson**— Saskatchewan Towards Offering Partnership Solutions (STOPS) to Violence

**Frances Wach**— Saskatchewan Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Saskatchewan SPCA)

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**Table 1**

Participant Characteristics (N = 9).

Participant	Welfare Sector	Agency	Region	Years in Current Position
1	Animal	SPCA/HS	Urban	0 to 5
2	Animal	SPCA/HS	Rural	20 or more
3	Human	DV Shelter	Rural	20 or more
4	Human	DV Shelter	Urban	16 to 20
5	Human	Victim Services	Rural	6 to 10
6	Animal	Veterinarian	Urban	11 to 15
7	Human	DV Shelter	Urban	20 or more
8	Human	DV Shelter	Urban	6 to 10
9	Animal	Veterinarian	Rural	6 to 10

*Note.* SPCA = Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; HS = Humane Society; DV Shelter = Domestic Violence Shelter. Participant numbers correspond with the illustrative quotes included.