

# Animal Safekeeping in Situations of Intimate Partner Violence: Service Providers' Experiences

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

Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada • pathssk.org • paths.research@sasktel.net

## Background

The link between intimate partner violence (IPV) and animal abuse has been documented in recent research. Victims of IPV experience pets being threatened, mistreated, and, in some cases, killed (Ascione et al., 2007; Barrett et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007; Stevenson et al., 2017; Wuerch et al., 2017). A Canadian study by Barrett and colleagues (2017) found that approximately 89% of survivors of IPV who owned pets stated that their partner had mistreated the pet. Perpetrators of IPV exploit victims' attachment to their pets as a way to coerce and control them (Ascione et al., 2007; Barrett et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007).

When victims of IPV own animals, they may delay seeking help or attempting to leave the relationship because they are unable to take their animals with them, they do not want to be separated from their animals, and they fear for the animals' well-being if they leave them behind (Ascione et al., 2007; Barrett et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2018; Wuerch et al., 2017).

Few studies have investigated service providers' experiences with the link. Ascione et al. (1997) and Krienert et al. (2012) surveyed domestic violence shelter workers in the US. Stevenson and colleagues (2018) surveyed domestic violence shelter workers in Canada. Wuerch et al. (2017, 2018) conducted key informant interviews and surveys of IPV professionals (staff of domestic violence shelters, domestic violence services, and victim services staff) and animal welfare professionals (SPCAs, humane societies, and veterinary clinics) in Saskatchewan, Canada.

While several studies have examined the impact for survivors of IPV who owned pets, few studies have investigated the impact of ownership and care for livestock. One notable exception is the previous research conducted in Saskatchewan.

## Method & Participants

The present study, which included surveys for IPV professionals and animal welfare professionals, was part of a larger mixed-methods study which included an online survey for the general public, an online survey for survivors, and interviews with survivors. The two surveys for IPV professionals and animal welfare professionals contained quantitative (yes/no/unsure) questions and open-ended textboxes to allow for qualitative responses. The surveys were open January- March 2020.

The study sought to examine service providers' knowledge of and experience with the intersection between IPV, animal maltreatment, and animal safekeeping concerns regarding pets, service animals, and livestock. Additional goals were to investigate the unique challenges and barriers for service providers in the province of Saskatchewan, including those in rural communities and the north, find out what is working well, and develop recommendations for continued improvements in this area.

128 IPV professionals and 43 animal welfare professionals completed the online surveys (n= 171). IPV professionals included staff of domestic violence shelters, domestic violence services, victim services, policing agencies, lawyers, and mediators. Animal welfare professionals included staff of veterinary clinics, animal rescues, humane societies, and SPCAs.

## Key Findings

When asked if, in their experience, the **safety and safekeeping of animals impacts individuals' planning and decision making to leave a relationship when IPV is taking place**, 90% of IPV professionals and 93% of animal welfare professionals said yes.

68% of IPV professionals and 58% of animal welfare professionals stated that their **awareness of the link** increased in recent years.

70% of animal welfare professionals stated that they **ask questions regarding the safety of children or adults in the home**, when they suspect animal abuse. 51% of IPV service providers overall (64% of domestic violence shelters) **ask about the safety of animals** at intake.

Service providers' comments illustrate the **connection between coercive control and animal abuse**: ". . . their partners have hurt animals just to show what they would do to the client if she didn't comply with his wishes."

When survivors cannot take their pets with them when they leave, they may end up **returning home to care for, visit, or attempt to retrieve the pet**, putting their own safety at risk. "*Women leave behind animals they care for and end up going back to the home to care for their pets, putting themselves in harm's way time and time again.*" Women who own livestock and large animals do the same, often returning to the farm or ranch to feed, water, and care for animals. IPV professionals stated **Emergency Intervention Orders** (a temporary order that would grant the victim the right to stay in the home, while the perpetrator is removed from the home) should be granted in these situations, allowing the survivor to stay in the home with their children and animals.

Many service providers expressed that "*there is nowhere in the community to safely keep the animal.*" IPV professionals working in rural and northern communities stated that there was **no animal welfare organization in the community** and surrounding area. In the larger urban centres where these services are available, there is more demand than space available and animal safekeeping could not always be provided at the time it was required.

Domestic violence shelters, as well as animal shelters, exist in larger centres. Survivors (and their pets) often have to **travel** several hours—a significant barrier if they do not have their own vehicle. Even if a survivor and their pet are able to access pet-friendly shelter and/or an animal safekeeping program after leaving a relationship, barriers to securing more permanent housing remain. Most **rental housing** (including publically-funded social housing) does not allow pets.

Both IPV and animal welfare professionals expressed the desire for **pet-friendly domestic violence shelters** (for examples, see Phillips, 2020). Professionals also stated the need to increase capacity at animal shelters and to have animal shelters with dedicated space for pet safekeeping in situations of IPV, and the need for funding to make this possible. Respondents also expressed the desire to recruit more foster families to assist, though they noted that many survivors feel that being separated from their pet is not an option.

"*Many women rely on their companion animals as support when they are dealing with the aftermath of trauma or are currently living through it. When women and their children have to give that up, it can cause more anxiety.*"

## Conclusion

While awareness of the link has increased considerably in recent years, there is still much more to be done, including training for professionals and awareness initiatives for the general public.

IPV and animal welfare professionals shared similar views regarding the link between IPV and animal maltreatment and needs for animal safekeeping. Both expressed the desire to strengthen partnerships between their sectors.

Professionals want to see more options available for pet safekeeping—including fostering, boarding at kennels and animal shelters, and pet-friendly domestic violence shelters. A respondent expressed the desire to be able "*to give [survivors] options so they do not feel like they have to choose between their animal's well-being and their own well-being.*" Service providers offered suggestions for increasing these services and discussed the importance of developing policies and procedures, thus making it easier to respond and assist survivors with animals when needed. Service providers expressed the difficulty of supporting clients who own large animals and livestock. More work is needed to find creative solutions that are both practical and safe.

## References

- Ascione, F. R., Weber, C. V., & Wood, D. S. (1997). The abuse of animals and domestic violence: A national survey of shelters for women who are battered. *Society & Animals*, 5, 205-218.
- Barrett, B. J., Fitzgerald, A., Peirone, A., Stevenson, R., & Cheung, C. H. (2018). Help-seeking among abused women with pets: Evidence from a Canadian sample. *Violence and Victims*, 33(4), 604-626.
- Barrett, B. J., Fitzgerald, A., Stevenson, R., & Cheung, C. H. (2017). Animal maltreatment as a risk marker of more frequent and severe forms of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.
- Collins, E. A., Cody, A. M., McDonald, S. E., Nicotera, N., Ascione, F. R., & Williams, J. H. (2018). A template analysis of intimate partner violence survivors' experiences of animal maltreatment: Implications for safety planning and intervention. *Violence Against Women*, 24(4), 452-476.
- Krienert, J. L., Walsh, J. A., Matthews, K., & McConkey, K. (2012). Examining the nexus between domestic violence and animal abuse in a national sample of service providers. *Violence and Victims*, 27, 280-295.
- Newberry, M. (2017). Pets in danger: Exploring the link between domestic violence and animal abuse. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 34, 273-281.
- Phillips, A. (2020). *Sheltering Animals and Families Together (SAF-T) Program Start-Up Manual* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.). saftprogram.org
- Simmons, C. A., & Lehmann, P. (2007). Exploring the link between pet abuse and controlling behaviors in violent relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 22(9), 1211-1222.
- Stevenson, R., Fitzgerald, A., & Barrett, B. J. (2018). Keeping pets safe in the context of intimate partner violence: Insights from domestic violence shelter staff in Canada. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 33(2), 236-252.
- Wuerch, M. A., Giesbrecht, C. J., Jeffery, N., Knutson, T., & Wach, F. (2018). Intimate partner violence and concern for animal care and safekeeping: Experiences of service providers in Canada. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Article first published online: August 24, 2018.
- Wuerch, M. A., Giesbrecht, C. J., Price, J. A. B., Knutson, T., & Wach, F. (2017). Examining the relationship between intimate partner violence and concern for animal care and safekeeping. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Article first published online: March 28, 2017.

