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How Domestic Violence Affects Our Pets

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By VERA LAWLOR
Contributing Writer

One beating too many and the woman took to the streets with her dog.

Eventually she found her way to Strengthen Our Sisters in Passaic County.

“She spent one night but we told her we couldn’t keep her dog so she left again,” said Sandra Ramos, director of the shelter.

Another abused woman kept her dog in the car while she slept at the shelter but she left because her dog was cold. And then there was the “tiny old woman” who showed up with a Chihuahua in her arms.

“She said, ‘Please can I bring him in with me?’” Ramos recalled. “We explained that we couldn’t take her little dog because then we’d have to take everybody else’s pets.”

That woman walked away too.

A growing body of research shows that men who hit their wives and children often extend that abuse to family pets as well. And when women dare to leave their abusers these animals may suffer dire consequences. One man drowned his wife’s two cats in the swimming pool, another fried his children’s goldfish, and one woman at a shelter received an audiotape containing the howls of her dog as it was being tortured.

Studies in the last few years show that 20 to 25 percent of battered women delay seeking safety for themselves and their children because they fear for the lives of the pets left behind. They can’t take their pets with them because human shelters don’t accept animals and the women don’t want to lose their pets by turning them over to animal shelters.

“There are some who would criticize these women for not putting their children first, but these animals are often the only link they have to love and affection,” said Alicia Bottari, a member of New Jersey Lawyers in Defense of Animals, and a volunteer on the Franklin Township Domestic Violence Response Team.

To help women leave abusive situations and still protect the animals, pet havens offering free shelter are springing up around the country.

The Humane Society of the United States has organized a First Strike program that operates as an umbrella agency of sorts matching social service agencies with safe havens nationwide.

Among the New Jersey programs is St. Hubert’s Tender Loving Critter Care, serving

northern and central New Jersey, and started in 1998 to provide shelter in cases of emergencies such as domestic violence, fire, hospital stays, or mental illness.

Through The Safe and Sound Housing Program, founded a few years ago at the Mount Pleasant Animal Shelter in East Hanover, protection is offered to pets of battered women in Morris County. The program hopes to eventually expand to include any domestic violence victim who needs its help.

Bottari said there are liability and risk issues that have to be considered when sheltering animals of battered women.

“Often these animals are abused themselves and can pose a risk to foster families,” Bottari said. “In this state animals are property, so the abuser can go to the shelter or the foster family and demand to get his ‘property’ back.”

A woman who has time to plan an escape should make sure her name is on the pet’s license and on pet store and animal hospital receipts, making it more difficult for an abuser to claim the animal, the lawyer said.

Animal havens operate differently when it comes to dealing with pets who are victims of domestic violence. Women using the Safe and Sound Housing Program at Mount Pleasant Animal Shelter, for example, are allowed an initial visit to put their minds at ease as to the safety of their animal companions. After that, the shelter suggests the women refrain from visiting until they can take the pets home as it is less traumatic for the animals. They are encouraged to call the shelter — everyday if need be — to see how their pets are doing. On the other hand there’s no direct contact between animal shelter staff and the abused women seeking help from St. Hubert’s Tender Loving Critter Care Program. All connections are made through social workers.

Some foster families do send care packages and photos of the pets to the women, but Currey always checks to make sure contact information has been excluded. “That protects the women and our foster families,” Currey said.

Women fleeing abuse and seeking shelter for their pets through the St. Hubert’s program drop their pets in a neutral area where Currey will collect them. Most of the animals go into foster homes with a few who have health or temperament problems kept in a shelter.

The only time that policy has been broken was when a terrified woman pulled up outside the shelter in a taxi. She was clutching a six-month-old baby while trying to keep an eye on four birds, a dog, and two cats. The woman was fleeing the state having just heard that her abusive husband had been bailed out of prison.

St. Hubert’s took the animals under its wings and the woman made her escape.

“She didn’t have the luxury of planning or the time to contact her social worker,” Currey said. “She knew if she had stayed in the home the situation would have gotten explosive.” As it turned out she and her baby never returned home and all her pets were placed with new families.

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Facts

Studies show that in homes where women and children are abused the animals are often beaten too. Following are some of the most recent survey results:

In a study in 2001 in the Journal of Violence Against Women, Clifton Flynn of the University of South Carolina reported that about 20 percent of the 107 women he surveyed were reluctant to leave an abusive home because they wanted to protect their pet.

In a year-long study in 2000 of 1,624 high-profile animal cruelty cases The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) found that 13 percent involved domestic violence in which the abuser beat his partner and forced the victim to witness cruelty to the family pet.

In 2001 Dr. Frank Ascione of Utah State University presented the results of a study of 101 women from five Utah shelters to the American Veterinary Medical Association. It found that about one in four women put off leaving an abuser out of fear for her pet's safety.

In 1997, Ascione led a survey of 50 of the largest shelters for battered women in 49 states and the District of Columbia. The results of that study showed that 85.4 percent of women and 63 percent of children entering the shelter talked about incidents of pet abuse in the family.

Resources

The **HSUS** offers a free brochure, "*Protecting Your Pet From Domestic Violence*," for battered women or women's shelters. For information or to order a copy, call (888) 213-0956.

The organization also offers a **state-by-state directory** of safe haven programs on its website at www.hsus.org.

What can victims of domestic violence do to protect their pets?

Develop an emergency plan for sheltering the pets, themselves, and their children.

Establish ownership of the pets (obtain an animal license, proof of vaccinations or veterinary receipts in victim's name to help prove they own the pets).

Prepare the pets for departure (collect vaccination and medical records, collar and identification, medication, bowls, bedding, etc.).

Ask for assistance from law enforcement or animal care and control officers to reclaim the pets if left behind.

Source: The HSUS.