

Developing Services for Domestic Violence Victims with Pets: Increasing Victim Safety and Offender Accountability

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Pets in the U.S.

- ❑ The majority of U.S. households have pets
- ❑ Most people view pets as members of the family
- ❑ Pets are a strong source of emotional support



Linking Pets and Domestic Violence

- ❑ Up to 71% of domestic violence victims entering shelters report that their pets were threatened, harmed, and/or killed by their partners
- ❑ Only 12% of domestic violence shelters nationwide accept pets
- ❑ In one survey, nearly 50% of victims reported delaying seeking safety due to concern for pets' welfare
- ❑ Jumps to 65% if the pets have already been abused
- ❑ Occurs across the life cycle of family violence

A tactic of power and control

- ❑ Threats to harm or “get rid of” a pet unless...
- ❑ Hurting/killing a pet to punish/retaliate
- ❑ Forcing victims to watch or participate in the abuse
- ❑ Depriving a pet of food and/or medical care
- ❑ “Next time it will be you”
- ❑ Pet “disappears” as way to send message to victim
- ❑ Battles over custody of pets
- ❑ Threats against pet if victim flees or discloses abuse
- ❑ Harming service animals to incapacitate victim
- ❑ Across the life cycle of family violence

History of Ahimsa House



- Founded by a survivor
- Name is a Sanskrit principle meaning “nonviolence”
- Emergency, confidential shelter for pets while their guardians reach safety
- Originally a central facility
- Spring 2007: Expanded to serve entire state

Emergency Animal Safehouse program

- Emergency shelter for pets while victims stay at DV shelter or other temporary accommodation
- Animals housed via network of boarding facilities and foster homes
- Pets/guardians reunited once it is safe & stable pet-friendly housing has been found
- Veterinary care: routine, emergency, and forensic
- Transportation of animals to safety
- Assistance/advocacy in locating pet-friendly transitional housing
- Pet deposits
- Pet supplies, food, etc. – pet carrier to airport

Emergency Animal Safehouse (cont.)

- Assistance available to any victim of DV in Georgia
 - Includes those not going to a shelter
 - Requirement that victim be actively seeking safety
 - Victims who are crossing service areas
- Assistance available regardless of type and number of animals
 - Important to ask victims whether there are “pets or other animals you are concerned about”
 - Do not assume others working with victim have already asked
 - Risk assessment for both human and animal

24-hour statewide hotline

- Crisis intervention
- Assistance with including pets in safety planning
 - Pet-related items you may want to gather
 - Logistics of a safe escape with animals
 - Noise, transportation, “special” species
- Referrals to DV shelters, law enforcement, other services
 - Victims will call about pets before seeking services for themselves

24-hour statewide hotline (cont.)

- Legal advocacy
 - Listing pets on protection orders & bond conditions
 - Legislative efforts in multiple states toward specifically authorizing inclusion of pets
 - May restrict to companion animals
 - However, may already be included in provisions re: personal property and “other relief,” or in statutory definition of domestic violence
 - Can authorize law enforcement escort to retrieve pets from residence
 - If not specifically mentioned on petition, victim unlikely to know pets can be included
 - Establishing proof of ownership of animals (adoption/purchase papers, microchip registration, vet records)

Professional and community outreach

- Cross-training for human services and animal services professionals: “widening the net” of coordinated community response to violence
- Guidance to jurisdictions on documenting and prosecuting animal cruelty & domestic violence
- Raising public awareness
- Consultation to help develop these services nationwide

Addressing this issue in your community

- Physical shelter programs for victims' animals
 - On-site vs. off-site models
 - Considerations:
 - Confidentiality
 - Type and number of animals
 - Ownership issues
 - Liability
 - Unreclaimed animals
 - Interagency partnerships, staffing, funding
- Can you provide other services besides housing?

Addressing this issue in your community (continued)

- Don't reinvent the wheel!
 - Unless there is no wheel
- Finding a program in your area
 - <http://alliephillips.com/family-violence-shelters-housing-pets/>
 - <http://www.ahimsahouse.org/directory>
 - <http://awionline.org/content/safe-havens-pets-domestic-violence-victims>

Addressing this issue in your community (continued)

- Building this topic into our service system / coordinated community response
 - ▣ Community engagement/training/“Link” coalitions
 - ▣ Animal cruelty task forces
 - ▣ Incorporate into your DV Task Force
 - Fatality Review
- Think about other professionals/agencies who “touch” this issue (both human services and animal care)

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Questions?

■ Please contact us anytime at 404-496-4038 or info@ahimsahouse.org

■ To reach Dr. Gupta:
director@ahimsahouse.org

■ Requests for immediate assistance: call our 24-hour crisis line at 404-452-6248

■ Safe Havens Listserv:

<http://lists.lists.ahimsahouse.org/mailman/listinfo/safehavens>