

Making the Connection between Animal Cruelty and Abuse and Neglect of Vulnerable Adults

by Randall Lockwood, Ph.D.



MAKING THE CONNECTION:
HELPING VULNERABLE ADULTS AND THEIR PETS



THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

Background

The co-occurrence of child abuse, domestic violence and animal abuse has been well-documented in many reports, and has been a frequent topic in the *Latham Letter* (Ascione, 1996; Lockwood and Ascione, 1998; Ascione and Arkow, 1999). Only recently have animal protection and social service professionals begun to realize that this same connection can often be found in the dynamics of the abuse or neglect of the elderly and other vulnerable adults (Rosen, 1995; Goldman Institute, 1997).

As with other forms of family violence, recognition of the association between elder abuse and animal cruelty is often first seen in the form of dramatic case histories. A California humane investigator recalled responding to a call about several abandoned dogs left to starve in an empty apartment. After removing the animals, she heard whimpering from a closet. Expecting it to contain more dogs, she was horrified to find an emaciated old man who had also been left behind by his caretakers. Recently in Washington, cruelty investigators responded to an anonymous call that a woman had been seen throwing a dead dog in a dumpster. When they arrived at the address they found another dog alive, as well as a 90 year-old emaciated and disoriented woman whose daughter had been coming by only to cash her mother's Social Security checks. Adult protect service investigators were called from the scene and the woman was hospitalized.

The elderly are often strongly attached to their animal companions (Cusack and Smith, 1984). Pets fill many needs for the aged. They can be a connection to the past and an incentive for future orientation, a source of engagement in reality, a facilitator of social interaction, providers of contact comfort and stress relief, a stimulus for physical exercise and much more. This special relationship makes them vulnerable to those who would exploit this bond to exert power and control over an older victim.

Animals may become involved in the abuse or neglect of the elderly in a variety of ways. They may be a tool for power and control, as in spouse abuse. They may also be used as tools in financial exploitation, as in cases where adult children refuse to care for a parent's pet. Declining animal welfare may also be an early warning sign of self-neglect or an indicator of hoarding or other behavior problems.

Elder abuse is perhaps the most under-reported form of family violence. Some experts estimate that less than 7% of elder abuse incidents come to the attention of authorities (Pillemer and Finkelhor, 1988). According to the National Center on Elder Abuse (1997), reports of such abuse rose from 177,000 to 293,000 in the period from 1986 to 1996, an increase of 150%. Advocates for vulnerable adults are beginning to see the need to enlist many other professionals, including animal care and control professionals and veterinarians, in the effort to identify and respond to people in need.

Perception of the Problem

Although many professionals within animal protection had provided case histories where there had been clear overlap between elder abuse and animal cruelty, we were uncertain how widely recognized this connection was by social service professionals. During late-Spring and Summer of 2001, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), with funding from the Dr. Scholl Foundation, distributed a questionnaire to Adult Protective Service supervisors and front line case workers surveying the level of awareness of and response to these issues within their agencies.

Responses were received from nearly 200 professionals in 40 states. The survey indicated that many of these professionals recognized the connection and often encountered situations requiring sensitivity to the attachment that older clients had to their pets. However, few agencies currently provide special training or have special

policies in place to address these issues and there has been little attempt to coordinate activities of humane societies, animal control agencies and social services involved in protecting vulnerable adults.

Specifically:

- More than 35% of respondents reported that clients seen by Adult Protective Services (APS) talk about pets having been threatened, injured, killed or denied care by caregiver.
- More than 45% reported that they have encountered evidence of intentional abuse or neglect of animals when visiting clients.
- More than 92% said that APS workers encountered animal neglect coexisting with a client's inability to care for himself/herself, indicating that reports of animal neglect may be an important warning sign for the presence of self-neglect by vulnerable adults.
- More than 75% of respondents noted that clients' concern for their pet's welfare affected decisions about interventions or additional services. Many people indicated that their clients often refused services or housing if the needs of their pets were not taken into consideration. However, few agencies had established working relationships with the appropriate animal care and control agencies in their area.
- Despite these concerns, only about 35% indicated that their agency includes questions about a client's animals on intake/assessment, fewer than 25% have policies in place for reporting suspected animal cruelty and only 19% have formal or informal cross-reporting and/or cross-training with animal agencies.

Solutions

In December of 2001 the first National Summit on Elder Abuse was held in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the National Center on Elder Abuse with support from the Administration on Aging and the Department of Justice. This meeting brought together 80 national leaders on elder abuse and family violence. The HSUS was asked to participate in recognition of its experience in establishing strategies to educate professionals and the public on issues of abuse. Among the many recommendations made by the Summit was a call to fund the development and implementation of a national elder abuse education and training curriculum that can be used as a toolkit by a wide variety of professionals, including those in humane work, animal care and control and veterinary medicine. The new brochure from The HSUS and NCEA (see page 10) is an important first step in developing that toolkit.

The HSUS has already participated in cross-training

events in six states bringing together professionals from Adult Protective Services, animal care and control, law enforcement and veterinary medicine to learn about these connections. More workshops are planned for the future. In addition to cross-training, some states are pursuing mandated reporting of suspected elder abuse by animal professionals. Illinois currently considers veterinarians mandated reporters for elder abuse and similar mandates for humane officers has been proposed in other states.

Neglect or abuse of a pet may be the first, and often the most visible, indication that an older adult is at risk. Once again, by being alert to animal cruelty, we can prevent the suffering of human and animal victims.

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Resources:

The Humane Society of The US and The National Center on Elder Abuse have prepared a new brochure entitled "Making the Connection: Helping Vulnerable Adults and Their Pets". Single copies are free. Packets of 100 are \$15.00. Contact First Strike, The Humane Society of the United States, 2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037. Website: www.hsus.org/firststrike

For more information on elder abuse, contact: The National Center on Elder Abuse, 1225 I Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005. Website: www.elderabusecenter.org

