Why Doesn’t she just LEAVE!?!

The Link Between Animal Abuse, Domestic Violence, and the Victim’s Decision to Seek Refuge:

The four forms of family abuse often co-occur. The link needs to be understood when working with victims of Domestic Violence →

Domestic abusers may kill, harm, or threaten animals to exert dominance and power over their victims. Animal abuse silences victims, and is a significant barrier that prevents them from leaving violent relationships. 

- Battered women consider their pets an important source of emotional support. This is important to consider in junction with the fact that many abusers isolate their victims from friends and family.

- Concern for the safety of companion animals affects women’s decision making about staying with, or leaving, an abusive partner.

- Studies done in Australia, the UK, and multiple in America found that women seeking shelter at domestic violence crisis centers reported concern for their pets welfare prevented them from seeking shelter sooner.

- Battered women worry about the safety of their pets both within abusive relationships and especially after coming into domestic violence shelters.

“I was a victim of domestic violence for 7 ½ years as were my children. We have always had pets, lots of them, they were and still are part of our family. In my case, staying at home and suffering beatings on a daily basis became more acceptable to me than leaving with the children without their pets, for doing what would have broken their hearts. I would have felt it was my decision to hurt them.”

1.5 million American women are battered by intimate partners every year.

60% of Americans own pets. Assuming this estimate is applicable across populations: 173 of the 289 women that sought refuge at Safe Haven Shelter in 2012 were pet owners.
What can be done to help victims?

**Immediate Local Intervention:**
- Formally inquire about pets during shelter intake evaluation
- Pets need to be included in each victim’s safety plans
- Recruit a group of local volunteers willing to temporarily foster pets of women seeking refuge.
- Develop a list of pet friendly housing in the area

**Regional Intervention:**
**Cross sector training:**
- Domestic violence outreach workers, and police officers need to be educated on the signs of animal abuse.
- Animal Shelter coordinators, Veterinarians, and Animal control agents need to be educated on the signs of family violence

**Client confidentiality releases:**
- Domestic violence workers, and animal control officers often work with the same families and need to keep in contact.

*This will help identify trends of violence within families, and early intervention will be more likely.*

**Legislative Policy Intervention:**
- Simultaneously allow women, her children and her pets to be removed from a home deemed violent
- Include the legal right to add pets into a victim’s order for protection, or harassment restraining order
- Establish harsher punishments for those found guilty of animal cruelty:
  - Getting in ‘the system’ may reveal later violent crimes
  - Intervening with animal abuse may prevent violence from escalating to human abuse

7. Safe Haven Shelter, 2012 annual report