



NATIONAL LINK COALITION

*Working together to stop violence
against people and animals*

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Elder Abuse and Animal Abuse: Issues and Opportunities

Much has been written about the human-animal bond and how pets can enhance the emotional and physical health of seniors, both in a therapeutic context and particularly in daily living. Pets can provide companionship, emotional support, daily exercise, a sense of purpose, security, and opportunities for staying social. Service animals can assist seniors who have hearing, visual or physical disabilities. Acquiring a pet can, under the right conditions, improve aging in place; where this is not feasible, animal-assisted therapy programs can bring visiting animals to seniors in long-term care, assisted living, memory units, adult day care, and other facilities.

But there is, unfortunately, also a “dark side” of the human-animal bond in which animals become the victims of cruelty, abuse and neglect when elders are involved. The result is species-spanning suffering.

We have long known that children who torture animals or who witness animal abuse may grow up and expand their aggressive acts against people, and that animal abuse and neglect may be symptoms of child maltreatment as well. We have also long known that domestic violence abusers target animals to control their human victims and warn them of the sad fates that will befall them if they dare to escape. The National Link Coalition calls these incidents “the Link,” examples of how animal abuse often co-occurs with and predicts interpersonal violence.

The newest area of The Link is the recognition of the association between animal abuse and elder abuse, and it takes several distinct forms. Seniors who love their pets, but who are on fixed income or who have mobility, transportation or memory issues, may inadvertently **neglect their animals**. Other seniors may spend their limited funds on their animals and experience **self-neglect** as a result. Many **animal hoarders** are seniors living in unhealthy and unsafe environments; they may **not receive a full range of services** because home health aides and caregivers may be reluctant to enter these residences due to the overwhelming stench and presence of vermin. The **death of a beloved pet** can be especially painful to a senior for whom the animal represents either a last link to a deceased spouse, or the sole opportunity for social interaction and physical exercise. And we have even had reports of children refusing to care for their elderly parents’ pets, and even **financial exploitation** from children holding pets hostage to extort money from them.

Link advocates nationwide are responding to these challenges. Adult Protective Services caseworkers are being trained to recognize that declining animal welfare is often an early warning sign of a senior's self-neglect or an indicator of animal hoarding problems. Cross-training and collaborative programs are being established between Adult Protective Services and other social services agencies, and local animal services and humane agencies to provide emergency foster care for hospitalized or incapacitated seniors. Assessment tools are being developed to screen for animal welfare issues in elder abuse cases. In Colorado, an act of abuse against an elder's animal that is intended to intimidate or punish the senior is defined as an act of elder abuse. Such collaborations can create healthier and more humane environments for vulnerable adults and animals.

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For Further Reading:

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