



NATIONAL LINK COALITION

*Working together to stop violence  
against people and animals*

The National Resource Center on The  
Link Between Animal Abuse and

Human Violence

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## Elder Abuse and Animal Abuse: Issues and Opportunities

Research into the human-animal bond confirms that 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:

1. Seniors who love their pets, but who are on fixed income or who have mobility, transportation or memory issues, may inadvertently **neglect their animals**.
2. Other seniors may spend their limited funds on their animals and experience **self-neglect** as a result.
3. Many **animal hoarders** are seniors living in unhealthy and unsafe environments.
4. Seniors may **not receive a full range of services** because home health aides and caregivers may be reluctant to enter residences due to the overwhelming stench and presence of vermin, excessive numbers of animals, or dangerous pets threatening their safety.
5. 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.
6. **Financial exploitation** may occur from children holding their parents’ pets hostage to extort money from them.

Link advocates nationwide are responding to these challenges:

- APS caseworkers are being trained to recognize that declining animal welfare is often an early warning sign of a senior’s self-neglect or animal hoarding problems.

- Collaborative programs are being established between APS and local animal services and humane agencies to provide emergency foster care for hospitalized or incapacitated seniors.
- In Colorado, an act of animal abuse intended to intimidate or punish a senior is defined as an act of elder abuse.

Such collaborations create healthier and more humane environments for vulnerable adults and animals.

The National Link Coalition encourages APS officials to take the following action steps to better protect all vulnerable members of the families they serve:

1. **Assess** for animal welfare, animal dangerousness, animal waste, pet grooming, clients eating pet food, and safety/risk-of-fall conditions during home visits. Identify veterinary and animal shelter support services (pet food banks, low-cost spay-neuter programs, pet-friendly domestic violence shelters, pet loss support lines) available in the community. Refer to the National Link Coalition's National Directory of Abuse Investigation Agencies for your specific county or city at <http://nationallinkcoalition.org/how-do-i-report-suspected-abuse>
2. Include pet concerns in **planning for transitions**: pet foster care or new homes while client is in hospital or long-term care. Include pets in relocation to subsidized housing.
3. Include pets in **end-of-life planning**. Alert veterinarians that requests to have all pets euthanized may suggest client's suicide ideation.
4. Include questions about the number, health and welfare issues, dangerousness, and veterinary support for clients' pets in **hotline, intake, interview, and assessment questionnaires**.
5. Treat client's **grief over pet loss** as a potentially serious emotional consideration.
6. Develop **inter-agency MOUs** for cross-training with animal control and humane societies.
7. Identify **pet-friendly housing opportunities** for seniors needing to relocate. Identify long-term care facilities with animal-assisted therapy visitors.
8. If client is capable, suggest **acquiring a pet or volunteering at an animal shelter** for physical exercise, social outreach, companionship, and sense of responsibility.
9. Promote state legislation for animal control and APS officials to **cross-report** abuse and neglect, with immunity from civil and criminal liability.

(June 2018)

### For Further Reading:

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