



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 individuals 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 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 vulnerable adults 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 co-occurring 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 coincides with and predicts interpersonal violence.

Forms of Animal Abuse Involving Older and Vulnerable Adults (May Indicate Elder Abuse)

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. **Animal Neglect:** Seniors who love their pets or farm animals, but who experience memory loss, fixed or low income, physical and transportation limitations, or social isolation, may inadvertently neglect their animals and fail to feed or groom their pets or provide veterinary care.
2. **Self-Neglect:** Seniors may spend their limited financial resources on their animals, or delay going into hospitals or long-term care because they have no one to care for their animals.
3. **Animal Hoarding:** While the unhealthy and unsafe environments marked by accumulating too many animals can affect any age group, animal hoarders tend to be elderly women.
4. **Denied services:** Home health aides, caregivers and Adult Protective Services (APS) caseworkers 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. **Attachment and bereavement issues:** 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:** Children have been known to hold their parents' pets hostage to extort money from them.
7. **Jealousy:** Disabled individuals' dependence on their service animals can cause a partner to become jealous of the emotional attachment given to the animal.

Link advocates nationwide are responding to these challenges:

- **Training:** 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. Animal control officers and humane society personnel in Maryland are now required to receive pre-professional and continuing education on the Link between animal abuse and elder abuse.
- **Inter-agency collaborations:** Collaborative programs are being established between APS and local animal services and humane agencies to provide emergency foster care for hospitalized or incapacitated seniors.
- **Illegal coercive control:** In Colorado, an act of animal abuse intended to intimidate or punish a senior is defined as an act of elder abuse, similar to coercive-control domestic violence laws in 10 states.
- **Pets in protective orders:** Abused vulnerable adults in California can obtain a protective order that prohibits abusers from harming their animals.
- **Cross-reporting:** Reporting of suspected animal abuse by APS caseworkers is mandated in Louisiana, Nebraska, Ohio, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Guam, and permitted in California, Indiana and Massachusetts. Animal services and humane officers are mandated or permitted to report suspected elder abuse in Arkansas, California, Maine, Massachusetts, Ohio, and the District of Columbia.
- **Federal guidelines:** The federal government's Administration for Community Living's guidelines for state APS agencies include recommendations that: APS collaborate with animal welfare organizations during investigations and interventions; the presence of animals in the home be included in requests for APS services; and that needs and risk assessments include questions about the presence of abused, dangerous or hoarded animals in the home.

Such collaborations create healthier and safer environments for vulnerable adults and animals.

Steps to Take

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 (e.g., 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. **Planning for transitions:** Locate pet foster care or new homes for animals while clients are in the hospital or long-term care. Identify **pet-friendly housing opportunities** for seniors needing to relocate. Identify long-term care facilities with animal-assisted therapy visitors.
3. **End-of-life planning:** Include decisions about pets in this process. Alert veterinarians that requests to have all pets euthanized may suggest a client's suicide ideation.
4. **Get a full picture:** Include questions about the number, health and welfare issues, dangerousness, and veterinary support for clients' pets in hotline, intake, interview, and assessment questionnaires.

5. **Emotional attachments:** Treat clients' grief over the death or disappearance of their pets as a potentially serious emotional consideration.
6. **Collaborations:** Develop inter-agency MOUs for cross-training with animal control and humane societies.
7. **Human-animal bond activities:** If the client is capable, suggest she or he acquire a low-maintenance pet or volunteer at an animal shelter for physical exercise, social outreach, companionship, and a sense of responsibility.
8. **Public policy:** Promote state legislation for animal control and APS officials to cross-report abuse and neglect, with immunity from civil and criminal liability.

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Resources

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National Law Enforcement Center on Animal Abuse

National Sheriffs' Association

1450 Duke Street

Alexandria, VA 22314

animalcruelty@sheriffs.org

<https://www.sheriffs.org/Animal-Cruelty-and-Elder-Abuse>

National Adult Protective Services Association

1612 K Street NW

Washington, DC 20006

<https://www.napsa-now.org>

National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life

1400 E. Washington Ave., Suite 227

Madison, WI 53703

<https://www.ncall.us>

For Further Reading:

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