



**Creating Relationships Between Domestic Violence Service Providers
and Animal Control/Humane Law Enforcement**

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Animal control agencies are tasked with enforcing local animal ordinances and, in many areas, state animal protection laws. Animal control officers may encounter victims of domestic violence in many ways, and they can be important partners for domestic violence advocates.

It is common knowledge that domestic abuse often goes undetected. However, a dog in the yard who has visible injuries or is severely underweight may be more easily noticed and reported by neighbors. Also, victims may report abuse of their animals more readily than they seek help for themselves. For these reasons, animal control officers may come in contact with domestic violence victims before anyone else does. Their training as first responders gives them the ability to make a quick assessment of a situation and determine whether an animal is in danger. If domestic violence professionals can help these officers widen their lens to include potential human victims of abuse, they may be able to provide resources and referrals to victims at an earlier stage; for example, a domestic violence program might choose to provide animal control officers with wallet cards containing the crisis line number and information about local resources.

Domestic violence organizations should also strongly consider reaching out to animal control agencies to offer training. While many, if not most, animal control officers may be versed in the basic connections between animal cruelty and domestic violence, they would benefit greatly from a deeper understanding of the dynamics of battering. How domestic violence may affect victims' behavior as well as batterer tactics may be relevant in situations officers encounter (e.g., claiming that the victim was the one who harmed the animal, or that the animal belongs to the batterer rather than the victim). In turn, animal control agencies may offer victim advocates insight into what they see "in the trenches" and educate them on ways to help victims protect their pets via the legal system: what to do if the animal becomes part of a cruelty case, or if the batterer attempts to gain custody of the victim's pet via the courts.

Animal control agencies may also be able to work with advocates to coordinate emergency safe housing (including transport) for the victim's pets should a domestic violence shelter or other place of safety not allow them, or if the victim decides not to leave the situation at this time but is concerned about the safety of the pets. Since significant numbers of victims will not seek safety themselves until they know their animals will also be safe, animal control can play an important role in removing this barrier to escape. As in all cases, it is better to establish collaborative interagency relationships, programs, and protocols proactively—before they are needed. Inviting representation from animal control agencies on family violence task forces can be a valuable first step in this direction and can widen the net of community engagement and response to violence.

It is unknown how many family violence task forces or Coordinated Community Response (CCR) teams include animal control agencies among their members. However, the Georgia Commission on Family Violence recommends that a veterinarian participate as a member of the

family violence task force, so that is a step in the right direction. Click [here](#) for more information.

Note: If any reader has experience serving on or knows of a task force or similar entity that includes a veterinarian or animal control/humane law enforcement officer, please contact Mary Lou Randour at marylou@awionline.org or Nancy Blaney at nancy@awionline.org.

Also in Georgia, collaboration takes another form. [Ahimsa House](#) provides emergency transportation, veterinary care, and confidential safe housing to animals whose owners are staying at any of the state's 46 domestic violence shelters, or who are staying elsewhere where they cannot bring their pets. A 24-hour crisis line, open to victims as well as advocates and other professionals working with victims, provides assistance with including animals in safety plans, legal advocacy, and coordination of services. Ahimsa House is a member agency of the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and its representatives serve on numerous Family Violence Task Forces across the state. Through building networks among domestic violence shelters, community-based domestic violence programs, animal protection organizations (animal control agencies and humane societies), veterinarians, and others, this program aims to incorporate recognition of the link between domestic violence and animal abuse into coordinated community response efforts statewide. [Click here](#) to see Georgia's 2012 Fatality Review Report featuring information about the intersection of animal abuse and domestic violence as a key area of awareness.

While the focus in this article has been on animal control, police officers responding to domestic violence calls should similarly take note of animals in the home. If the residence is to be vacated (e.g., the abuser is going to jail and the victim to a shelter or hospital), animals should not be left alone in the home. Here again, collaboration between agencies is key. If responding officers observe animal cruelty, they should also follow protocol for documentation and investigation of this crime, whether handled by their department or by an animal control agency. In many states, even where animal control enforces humane laws, police officers and sheriffs are either permitted or mandated to enforce animal protection statutes and to arrest those found violating them, providing another pathway to arrest of domestic violence offenders. Further, animal cruelty charges at either the misdemeanor or felony level may be what stick when a domestic violence case becomes difficult to prosecute, and advances in veterinary forensics offer evidence that can be compelling even if victims do not testify.

Recognizing the connections between animal cruelty and domestic violence—and forming effective partnerships among professionals on each side of the equation—can promote both safety and justice for all victims of domestic violence.

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