

Using pets to perpetuate abuse

by Heather Duncan and Henna Schafer, staff attorneys

Our pets. They are members of our families who bring us joy and love us unconditionally.

They rely on us for everything. Innocents in the truest sense.

Sadly, family pets are often used as pawns in domestic violence. [Over 70% of pet owners in shelters](#) report their abuser threatened, injured, or killed their pet to control them.

This control plays out in three common ways:

First, perpetrators may harm pets in front of survivors and their children to scare and threaten them - essentially to demonstrate what could happen to them next. A scary real life example happened to one of our domestic violence clients who kept pet goats when her abuser shot one of the animals in front of her to demonstrate his power and control. This was deeply traumatizing for the client and prevented her from making plans to leave for some time. Exacerbating this, over 75% of pet abuse takes place in front of children. Imagine all the layers of fear and guilt a survivor experiencing this must feel.

Second, perpetrators may threaten to harm the pet if the survivor leaves. Survivors with pets feel faced with an impossible choice: stay to protect the animal or leave to

protect myself. Over 50% of pet owners in shelters report their pets were left with their abuser. At the time they are deciding whether to leave, survivors may not know of options they have to one day reunify with their pets. And there's likely no safe way (at least in the immediate hours or days after leaving) for survivors to check in on a pet's well being.

Finally, survivors contemplating leaving abuse may worry whether they can find a safe and permanent place with or for their pet. Unfortunately, there are few local temporary shelter options for survivors who escape with a pet. Pets may even be a barrier if a survivor plans to stay with a friend - especially if pets are horses or other large animals. One survivor who sought assistance at Community Legal Aid took matters into her own hands - reporting her perpetrators' abuse and surrendering her dog to the humane society before moving into shelter herself. Luckily, she was able to be reunited with her pet after achieving permanent separation, but there were many potential pitfalls to this solution.

These situations involving animal abuse are all too common and tug at our heartstrings in a special way. They call for changes and solutions.

Together we can work to increase education for survivors - and the people who help them - to ensure they understand their full rights. When securing a protection order (a court order mandating that a perpetrator stay away from a victim), survivors may petition the court for removal and control of pets. Assistance from a lawyer can help ensure this process happens in a way and at a time most beneficial to the survivor. With a properly executed protection order, law enforcement should help survivors secure their animals in a safe way. Survivors who know this may be more likely to leave - and leave sooner - with the understanding that a mechanism is in place to help protect and reunify with their animal companions.

On a more systemic level, allowing survivors to spend victim compensation dollars to safely board their animals could remove a lot of stress and uncertainty and lead

to more survivors leaving sooner. (These are funds from the Ohio Attorney General's Office for innocent victims of violence crime.) Local kennels and boarding facilities could agree to leave a space open for these special cases, so room is assured immediately, day or night. This creative solution could mean safety and protection for countless survivors and their pets while giving the community a valuable role to play in a solution.

Our furry friends, and the survivors who love them, deserve to be safe and free from harm. If you or someone you love is experiencing domestic violence you can find services near you by visiting the [Ohio Domestic Violence Network](#). Suspensions of animal abuse in Ohio can be reported to the [Ohio Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals](#).

(Any sort of animal abuse - whether or not part of domestic/ intimate partner violence - is the reddest of red flags. This troubling behavior should never be ignored by parents, spouses, teachers, medical professionals, veterinarians, and social service partners. Research connects animal abuse to child abuse, family violence, random violence, and mass shooting or other mass murder events. Further, it's a crime.)

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

SIDEBAR:

Local resources that are able to assist survivors with pets.

[Domestic Violence Project Inc.](#) - (330) 453-7233

[Peace for Pets](#) - (330) 484-9537

[Hope & Healing \(Battered Women's Shelter Summit/Medina\)](#) - (330) 374-1111

Find other pet-friendly domestic violence shelters in the U.S. at [Sheltering Animals and Families Together - SAF-T Program](#)

Service providers for survivors can find resources and funding opportunities to support pet friendly shelters at <https://redrover.org/additional-dv-resources/>

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