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## **Connecticut Assembly's Select Committee on Children**

Hearing about the link between animal cruelty and violence against people

Testimony, October 5, 2010

Good morning Senator Musto, Representative Urban, members of the Committee on Children and members of the Human Services Committee and a special greeting to Representative Fred Camillo who represents our interests in Greenwich.

My name is Suzanne Adam and I am the Director of Domestic Abuse Services in Greenwich. I am delighted by your invitation to say a few words about the link between animal cruelty and violence against people.

Since 1979 Domestic Abuse Services has been committed to the physical safety and emotional well-being of adults and children who are victims of domestic abuse, by providing client-defined services that are safe, empowering and confidential. Through outreach, training and education we provide information that raises community awareness of domestic abuse and the struggles faced by its victims. We build collaborative relationships with community organizations to remove barriers to safety and improve victims access to housing, financial security and legal services, childcare and other services. Domestic Abuse Services provides an environment that fosters the empowerment of individuals who have had their sense of personal safety and freedom taken from them.

The New York Daily News ran an article last May with the headline stating "Dog Dies in Hi-Rise Plunge; Nab Owner's Ex-beau" New York City papers covered this shocking story of an abusive man who took revenge on his ex-girlfriend by throwing her beloved little dog out the window of her high-rise apartment building. Unfortunately, this story and others like it are neither shocking nor news those who work in domestic violence.

It is important for one to understand the power of abuse. It's very common

for an animal to be caught up in whatever violence is going on in the home. Animal abuse accompanied by domestic violence differs from other animal abuse. In the straightforward cases of animal abuse, the abuser is taking something out on the animal.

In domestic violence, however, the abuser often uses the animal to hurt a particular person – usually the person who loves and cares for the pet. The animal is abused in order to:

- To demonstrate power and control over the family
- To isolate the victim and children
- To enforce submission
- To perpetuate an environment of fear
- To prevent the victim from leaving or coerce his/her to return
- To punish for leaving or showing independence
- To Intimidate, harass or silence the vulnerable person.

In effect, the message the abuser is sending is, 'Look what I can do to your animal, and imagine what I can do to you,'" she says

In recent years, a strong connection has been documented linking animal abuse and domestic violence. A New Jersey study found that in 88 percent of families where there had been physical abuse of children, there were also records of animal abuse

In Wisconsin, battered women revealed that in four out of five cases, abusive partners had also been violent toward pets or livestock

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence conducted its own study in which 85.4 percent of women and 63.0 percent of children reported incidents of pet abuse after arriving at domestic violence shelters.

The Chicago Police Department's Domestic Violence Program took a look at the criminal histories of animal fighting/animal abuse arrestees for 2000–2001 and found that approximately 30 percent had domestic violence charges on their records

- For many battered women, pets are sources of comfort providing strong emotional support: 98% of Americans consider pets to be companions or members of the family.
- Between 25% and 40% of battered women are unable to escape abusive situations because they worry about what will happen to their pets should they leave
- 71% of pet-owning women entering women's shelters reported that their batterer had injured, maimed, killed or threatened family pets for revenge or to psychologically control victims

Just last week I answered a hotline call of a woman who was resigned to the fact that in order for herself to receive shelter services and be safe from harm she had to be separated from her two cats. She was crying as she told me that she put up with two additional weeks of physical abuse because the thought of being apart from her animals and fearing for their safety was too much to bear. Now with two broken bones and a broken heart she was reluctantly preparing herself to enter shelter.

Our child counselor recently showed me a family portrait a child drew while in counseling. She included her dog Brewster but left out her abusive father. She also shared another story of a child who stated that the only good thing in his life was his dog. He said, "My dad says I am a waste of space, my mom is busy taking care of my sisters or crying with her friends, and my friends parents won't let them come over any more. Sparky is the only one left who loves me no matter what.

In a poem a 5<sup>th</sup> grader wrote:

"I had too many pets that died.

I really don't want to talk about it.

I can't tell you about it either.

I just don't want to.

It makes me too sad.

The door closed,

Don't ask me anymore.

I will cry into the ocean."

So what can we do?

With this understating of the link between domestic violence and animal cruelty Domestic Abuse Services asks each victim and their child upon initial intake or hotline call:

- If they have any pets?
- Has the batterer or anyone else threatened to harm their pet?
- Did concern for your pet's welfare keep you from leaving sooner than now?
- Are you leaving your abusive partner because of the abuse of a pet?
- Will they need assistance in finding a safe place for the pet if you leave?

We document any signs of animal abuse and report it to the police who investigate animal cruelty. Many victims will not go forward with the prosecution of their abuser. However, prosecution on animal cruelty charges can result in incarceration or treatment equivalent to what might result from a domestic violence prosecution.

We work with victims to be sure they include pets in their safety planning as well as work with our local animal control and veterinarian offices to establish programs for the emergency housing of pets coming from homes experiencing violence

It is imperative that first responders understand the connection between animal abuse and family violence. When responding to domestic calls it is important to be alert for signs that children and/or pets might be victimized. Children may be more willing to discuss what has happened to a pet than their own victimization.

Animal Shelters and Humane Organizations can reach out to local domestic violence shelters and establish programs for emergency housing of pets from homes with domestic violence

If no space is available, work with animal foster care agencies to establish a network of homes that might provide emergency care for these pets

Incorporate information on these connections in school programs, particularly those that might reach children at risk of family violence



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Animal cruelty is increasingly viewed as a serious issue by professionals in law enforcement and mental health—as well as by the general public. The screening for animal abuse as well as effective prosecution of animal abuse has many benefits. It can provide an early and timely response to those who are, or who are risk of becoming, a threat to the safety of others. It can provide an added tool for the protection of those who are victims of family violence.

As you continue to gather information about the link between animal cruelty and domestic violence, I urge you to look for solutions that hold abusers accountable for their actions without revictimizing victims by separating them from their beloved pets.

Thank you.