

Quick Facts:
Why is The Link important for...Adult Protective Services?



Adult protective services workers see multiple forms of family violence and neglect.

- More than one-third of adult protective services caseworkers reported that their clients' pets are threatened, injured, killed, or denied care (Boat & Knight, 2000).
- Memory loss, economic constraints, and physical limitations may cause elder owners to neglect their pets' food, water, shelter, or veterinary care.
- In one study, 92% of adult protective services caseworkers reported they encountered animal neglect co-existing with their clients' inability to care for themselves (Humane Society of the United States & State of Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, 2003).

Cases involving animals may be difficult to resolve.

- Adult protective services caseworkers or homemakers may feel threatened or overwhelmed by animals on the premises and may need assistance from animal protection organizations. Interventions involving animals may require creative solutions. Pre-establishing lines of communication with animal care and control organizations can resolve these issues more expeditiously (Arkow, 2003).

Pet owners may have strong emotional ties to their animals, which can make them vulnerable.

- Elderly pet owners may have long-standing and deep emotional ties to their animal companions: they may defer entering nursing homes until their animals pass away, or they may refrain from obtaining new pets out of fear of developing new attachments, for economic considerations, or because they fear the animals will outlive them.
- Only 2% of pet owners consider their animals as "property": 51% consider their animals as "companions" and 47% consider them as "members of the family" (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2002).
- Seniors are vulnerable to those who would exploit this bond to exert power and control or to retaliate. Perpetrators may manipulate this bond to intimidate or coerce victims; they may threaten to abuse or get rid of the pet.

Some seniors go to extremes with these emotional ties and become "hoarders" or "collectors."

- The stereotypical hoarder who collects an unhealthy number of animals is an elderly person who may care for hundreds of pets in inhospitable living conditions.
- In some cases, the animals may be well-fed but the hoarder is malnourished. Elders may neglect their own care in lieu of their pets' care. Seniors may spend money on pet food or veterinary bills while not providing for their own needs. There are anecdotal reports of seniors subsisting on diets of animal food (Humane

Society of the United States & State of Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, 2003).

- These persons may need psychological counseling and social services interventions (Patronek, 2004).

Animal welfare organizations are often first responders and the first point of social services intervention.

- Because abused and neglected animals may be outdoors in plain sight, neighbors may report suspected animal maltreatment to SPCAs, humane societies and animal control officers; these personnel may be the first community service agency on the scene.
- Establishing lines of communication, cross-training programs, and referral protocols with these agencies can uncover cases of elder abuse that would otherwise go unreported (Arkow, 2003).

Participating in Link programs can build awareness of adult protection issues.

- Establishing cross-training and cross-reporting protocols expands the community caregivers who are familiar with adult protective organizations and can generate more community support for elder abuse prevention (Arkow, 2003).

Clients may be more willing to talk about animal abuse or neglect than other forms of family violence.

- Victims and witnesses of elder abuse may be reluctant to discuss their situation with strangers or government officials. Because people enjoy talking about their pets, you can use this to your advantage as an icebreaker to initiate discussions about the animals in the household. This information may uncover patterns of violence and control, which can better inform the investigation.
- Showing interest in the client's animals is a way to develop a relationship of trust and start a conversation (Arkow, 2003).

Investigation can help animals in crisis

- Your work may identify animals at risk who need to be referred to a humane society, SPCA, or animal control agency (Arkow, 2003).

Cross-reporting may be required by law.

- California and Illinois require animal welfare agencies and social service agencies to report suspected abuse of animals or elders. Adult protective services intake personnel need not identify specific acts of animal cruelty, but should be able to determine if any animals are in danger.

Animal abuse is a crime.

- The United States has the oldest laws in the world preventing cruelty to animals, dating to the Colonial era of 1641 (Animal Welfare Institute, 1990). All U.S. jurisdictions have prohibitions against animal maltreatment, and over 42 states declare some forms of animal abuse to be felonies.

Resources for Adult Protective Services

Arkow, P. (2003). *Breaking the cycles of violence: A guide to multi-disciplinary interventions: A handbook for child protection, domestic violence, and animal protection agencies*. Accompanying video. Alameda, CA: Latham Foundation.

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Cusack, O., & Smith, E. (1984). *Pets and the elderly: The therapeutic bond*. New York: Haworth Press.

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Humane Society of the United States & National Center on Elder Abuse. (2002). Making the connection: Helping vulnerable adults and their pets. (Brochure). Washington, DC: HSUS.

Lockwood, R. (2002, Winter). Making the connection between animal cruelty and abuse and neglect of vulnerable adults. *Latham Letter*, 10-11.

National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse. (1997). Elder abuse and animal cruelty: Is there a link? *Nexus* 3(3), 1-6.

Rosen, B. (1995). Watch for pet abuse – it might save your client's life. *Shepards ElderCare/Law Newsletter* 5(5), 1-9.

What Can You Do?

- Take reports of animal cruelty seriously. Animal abuse is a crime in itself and often just one form of family violence. Animal investigations often uncover other crimes.
- Be familiar with anti-cruelty laws and the animal welfare, humane, and animal control organizations in your community.

- Invite officials from animal protection, child protection, and domestic violence agencies to provide training for your staff on how to recognize and report all forms of family violence they deal with.
- Establish lines of communication with these agencies so when your work uncovers other forms of family violence you are prepared to make a report or referral as needed.
- Be aware of the psychological importance of pets in the lives of families.
- Add questions about the presence and welfare of household animals to risk assessments and intake forms. Because people often talk easily about their pets, use this to your advantage to initiate conversations in stressful situations. The information gathered will help you to better understand family patterns and identify others who may be at risk.
- Maintain a list of community agencies that provide services and resources for victims of child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse, and animal abuse. Make this list available to staff and clients. Animal shelters, breed rescue groups, veterinary clinics, kennels, etc., may provide low-cost services such as transportation to vets, animal welfare hotlines, pet food, veterinary care, spaying/neutering, cleaning litter boxes and backyards, and foster care for pets whose owners are temporarily hospitalized.
- Lobby for laws that would add animal care and control officers to those mandated to report suspected elder abuse, and adult protective services workers to those mandated to report suspected animal cruelty, neglect, and abuse.
- Sponsor a workshop to educate your colleagues about The Link. American Humane has a speaker's bureau to provide these presentations.

Bibliography

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