

## ROYAL COMMISSION INTO FAMILY VIOLENCE

### SUBMISSION: THE LINK BETWEEN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ANIMAL ABUSE

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I have been involved with domestic violence services since 1975. After many years working in a refuge, I established the Eastern Domestic Violence Outreach Service (EDVOS) in 1994 and managed the service until my retirement in January 2004. I have been involved with numerous Ministerial and Advisory committees and I have presented papers at major conferences throughout Australia. I pioneered the social policy of women remaining in their homes and demonstrated the significance of pet animals in domestic violence situations. In 2007 I was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for the provision of support and counselling services to women affected by domestic violence. I am currently a member of the board of the Eastern Domestic Violence Service.

In making this submission, I address Question 8 of the Issues Paper 31 March 2015: *'gaps or deficiencies in current responses to family violence ...'*

I am very aware of many gaps and deficiencies in current responses to family violence and I am sure that the Royal Commission will be informed about them. Instead I will concentrate on the significance of pet animals and why we need to make the connection between domestic violence and animal abuse.

Women living with violence are often inhibited in their decision-making because of threats to the safety of their pet animals. Perpetrators of violence use threats or inflict actual physical harm to the pets in order to coerce and control their partners to remain within a violent relationship. The abuse of pets in front of the family is often an example of what might happen to them if they leave. Women are reluctant to leave home without their pets and in some cases delay leaving. The women and children are trapped and this is a major reason why some women feel that they have no option but to remain in a violent situation. In Victoria, women's refuges are mainly communal models and are not designed to house the pets belonging to their residents. It has been a known fact for years, amongst refuge workers, that the pets are highly significant to the women and children living with violence.

In 2001, whilst working at the Eastern Domestic Violence Service I formed a partnership with Monash University to explore the relationship between domestic violence and animal abuse. In brief, the study of the 102 women who were being supported by domestic violence services, found that 53 per cent of the women in violent relationships reported having pets hurt or killed. In answer to the question 'Has your partner ever threatened to hurt or kill one of your pets?' 46 per cent said that their pets had been threatened. Women who had at least one child with them during the relationship (i.e., 93 women in the domestic violence group) were asked additional questions. A total of 29% (27 of 93) of mothers reported that their children witnessed their partner abusing the pets. Twenty-nine percent (27 of 93) reported that their children had witnessed their partner threatening the pets. Children committing actual pet abuse was reported by 19% (18 of 93) of the mothers in the domestic violence group.

This study was the first Australian research to examine the connection and was published in the United States in 2008: 'The Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse: An Australian Study' by Volant, A.M., Johnson, J.A., Gullone, E., and Coleman, G.J. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (Vol 23 No 9 pp 1277-95, <http://online.sagepub.com>).

The results of this study were given to the Victorian Law Reform Commission when it was planning changes to the Crimes (Family Violence) Act 1987, so it was very heartening to see the inclusion of pet abuse in the Family Violence Protection Act 2008.

Prior to and during this research the Eastern Domestic Violence Service (EDVOS) continued to liaise with Animal Aid at Coldstream to look after the pets belonging to our clients. There are no visits by the family whilst the pets are at the shelter because of security concerns and it would be very unsettling for the animals. The family can telephone at anytime. Sometimes the family will be given a photograph of their pet so that the woman and kids no longer have to fret about them and can look forward to the day when they are all reunited.

This informal relationship with Animal Aid eventually blossomed into the *Pets in Peril Program* in 2006. Any woman in the Eastern region who is escaping domestic and family violence can contact EDVOS and use this resource. The *Pets in Peril Program* is a most valued resource for the women since it addresses, in a most practical way, violence against them and the protection of their children and pet animals from harm, by allowing them all to find safe shelter if they have to flee. There is a wonderful undercover network of veterinary clinics that will accept and house a pet for 24 hours, free of charge, when contacted by EDVOS. When a woman is en route to a domestic violence service she may decide, on the advice of EDVOS to leave her pet with one of the participating veterinary clinics rather than drive to the animal shelter. Animal Aid will be notified by EDVOS of the whereabouts of the pet and will collect the animal for boarding at their shelter. The whole model relies on the goodwill of Animal Aid to cover much of the cost of housing the animals because unfortunately, it is not a funded program and the women usually do not have the money to pay for their pets to be at the shelter.

At the same time as the previously mentioned research in 2001, I had the opportunity to develop a different approach to domestic violence. The Department of Human Services in the Eastern region announced a funding opportunity for new initiatives in responding to family violence. The domestic violence service system for the last 25 years had been based on the fact that women and children would leave the home. The effects of this enforced dislocation from home were immediate poverty and loss of all that was familiar. The criminal behaviour of the violent partner was ignored and remained unchallenged – he continued to live in the family home whilst his family was on the streets.

During this time we were also trying to work out what to do about the pets. We realised that as well as trying to find housing for women and children we were now committed to house their animals as well. We were fully aware how unjust it was for women and their children to be forced to leave their homes. Then the penny dropped! What on earth were we doing! Why not remove the perpetrator instead? EDVOS wrote a successful submission detailing this new direction and, with funding from DHS, started to pursue the presumption that some women could safely remain in the home if the perpetrator was removed. Many women have now chosen this option. It has been a most successful initiative and has become part of social policy in Victoria. Of course, there will always be women and children who cannot choose to stay at home because it will not be safe for them to do so. If they have pets then they will need to be relocated as well. Sometimes the move may only be for a short period of time, for example, if the woman is seeking an Intervention Order or is in the Family Court.

I hope that the evidence-based research both here and overseas demonstrating the profound importance of the link between domestic violence and animal abuse leads to some solutions for this problem:

- A short-term solution could be giving women, who need to leave home, an emergency grant that includes the cost of shelter for their beloved pets.
- In the longer term, veterinarians could play an important role if they suspect that an animal has non-accidental injuries and that these injuries are an indicator of violence at home. If the woman comes to the veterinary clinic on her own with the animal, it would then be safe to ask her what is happening at home. It is my experience that women are relieved that somebody has asked this question. The veterinarian does not have to get too involved in the story but needs a resource list which provides information and referral numbers for the Crisis Line or local family violence agencies. Probably the veterinarian would be more likely to do this if they had some training on the interrelatedness of violence.
- The Common Risk Assessment Framework (CRAF) training should be offered to veterinarians and their nursing staff who would benefit from the first level of CRAF 'identifying Family Violence'. They are often the first to encounter both animal abuse and family violence.
- Mandatory reporting by veterinarians of suspected animal abuse should be introduced.
- In Canada and parts of the U.S. veterinarians are legally obliged to report to Child Abuse Services if they treat an animal that lives with a family with children, and if they believe the animal has been deliberately harmed or neglected. This legal requirement to report highlights the strong link between domestic violence, animal abuse and the increased risk of child abuse. This strong link places this cohort of women and children in the highest risk category for ongoing serious abuse.
- When children begin to copy the perpetrator's abusive behaviour towards the pets – this shows not only the controlling nature of this particular type of violence but also the serious damage it can cause to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of children.

The link between domestic violence and animal abuse is now well established but rarely acknowledged as a major factor in discussing violence against women. In making this submission, I hope that practical solutions will be forthcoming from the deliberations of the Royal Commission.