

# The Columbus Dispatch

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Opinion

## **Column: Abuser takes advantage of victim's bond with pet**

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October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month — a time not merely to acknowledge domestic violence, but also to bolster our response to it. What more can we do to assist survivors?

There is one way that is often overlooked: We can remove a significant impediment to survivors getting to safety by providing more resources that help them protect their animal companions, who are also caught in the cycle of abuse.

Animal cruelty is often a critical component of violence in the home. Studies have found that between 46% to 71% of battered women reported that their pets had been threatened, harmed or killed by their partner. Women in domestic violence shelters were 11 times as likely to report animal abuse by their partners as women who had not experienced abuse. In fact, pet abuse is one of the four most predictive factors associated with intimate-partner violence.

Moreover, and of critical importance: According to multiple surveys, significant numbers of battered women delay leaving a dangerous situation out of concern for their pets' safety. Abusers understand the bond between their victims and their companion animals, and they exploit that relationship to control, manipulate, frighten and punish their victims.

There is a pressing need for “safe havens” — sheltering services that assist victims of domestic violence with placing their companion animals out of harm's way so that they may seek safety for themselves. A nationwide directory of 1,400 of these programs is maintained online by the Animal Welfare Institute.

To help address this shortage of safe havens, the Pet and Women Safety Act was signed into law last December (as part of the 2018 Farm Bill) to provide grants to programs that offer shelter and housing assistance for domestic violence survivors with companion animals. Another result of the PAWS Act is that pets, horses and service and emotional support animals are now covered by

federal laws governing interstate stalking, protection order violations and restitution. The law also urges states to allow companion animals to be included on protection orders (as Ohio and 34 other states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have already done).

There is heightened awareness among law enforcement professionals, the animal welfare community, domestic violence advocates and other social service workers that animal cruelty can, and often does, occur alongside violence against partners, children and elderly family members. Those on the front lines understand that paying attention to animal cruelty can aid in investigating and prosecuting violent offenders.

A recent case of child abuse in Ohio illustrates this relationship. Robert Lee Slocum of Columbus was charged with domestic violence, assault and child endangerment after allegedly beating his 3-year-old son repeatedly with an electrical cord in a grocery store parking lot. A deeper look into Slocum's background by one media outlet revealed that he had previously been charged with animal cruelty in connection with a malnourished dog living in poor conditions and suffering from an untreated skin infection.

Neglecting an animal to this extreme often suggests that the cruelty is as purposeful — and causes as much suffering — as physical assault.

Responding to animal cruelty and other family violence in a holistic way takes communication and cooperation among humane law enforcement agents, social service workers, veterinarians and animal control officers. To that end, state Reps. Laura Lanese, R-Grove City, and Sara Carruthers, R-Hamilton, have reintroduced legislation (HB 33) to expand cross-reporting of human and animal abuse — that is, requiring these front-line service providers to be alert to signs of such abuse and share information with one another. (A similar bill passed the House in the last session but the Senate did not act on it.)

Domestic violence awareness must translate into action. Providing greater resources to domestic violence survivors and their companion animals and facilitating communication among those who interact with families in crisis constitute a powerful response to the cycle of domestic violence and help to keep Ohio communities safe.

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