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OHIO
ANIMAL
ADVOCATES

ASSESSMENT REPORT:

COVID-19, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & ANIMAL ABUSE IN OHIO

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REPORT BREAKDOWN

Assessment of access to domestic violence protection during COVID, and policy recommendations.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, many survivors of domestic violence have been quarantined in their homes with those who abuse them. An abuser often controls the survivor's phone and access to the Internet and social media as well as their ability to drive or get help. They often fully isolate the survivor from friends and family.

Covid-19 has presented abusers with more opportunities to control and harm survivors while limiting the survivor's capability to get help, go to a hospital for care, protect their children or animals, or obtain protection via ex-parte or protection orders.

This report evaluates the survivor's access to legal protection from abusers by examining the websites of the State of Ohio and its 88 county governments' websites, analyzing the data for strengths and weaknesses in available resources, and concluding with policy recommendations to better aid survivors of violence in Ohio.



ASSESSMENT

Data on what county-level resources were available to domestic violence survivors, and for animal abuse protections.

1 in 4

WOMEN experience sexual a/o physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner each year.

1 in 10

MEN experience sexual a/o physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner each year.

75,466

Total calls in 2018 for aid from those experiencing a domestic violence incident

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Nationally, more than 10 million individuals—one in four women and one in 10 men—experience sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner each year. According to the most recent *Ohio Attorney General's Domestic Violence Report*, in 2018 there were 75,466 total calls for aid from those experiencing a domestic violence incident and 65,845 reported survivors of domestic violence, seven percent of whom were children. These statistics were gleaned from phone calls to law enforcement and government agency and response reports.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a government-wide shutdown, which included law enforcement decisions to avoid direct contact with the public as much as possible; courts being inaccessible in some instances for months; and social service agencies being forced to shut their doors and forgo critical home visits. Global evidence suggests that the need for domestic violence resources and protection from abusers has increased during this time, yet access to resources and protection has become highly limited (*New England Journal of Medicine*). Throughout the pandemic,

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

many domestic violence survivors have been forced to request help, ex-parte orders, protection orders, and shelter via phone or Internet. The purpose of this assessment was to gather data on what county-level resources were available to survivors by: **visiting** the websites of each of Ohio's 88 county governments; **calling** counties for clarification when necessary; and **identifying** counties that, through their county court systems, offered domestic violence survivors online access to protection forms or other forms of aid.

THE FOLLOWING DATA EMERGED FROM THE ASSESSMENT:

- **22** county websites linked to the Supreme Court of Ohio's main protection order webpage, which includes multiple forms of protection orders, but provided no instruction regarding what to fill out or when/where to submit. *(Note: at the time of this analysis, pets were not included on the Ohio Supreme Court protection form, though pet protective orders were passed by the Ohio Legislature in 2014. Effective 4/15/2021, protection forms offer instructions and include pets).*
- **5** county pages directed viewers to the main Supreme Court of Ohio page.
- **1** county page linked to its library website with no information on domestic violence.
- **1** county page required applicants to come into the court and have their requests for protection notarized.
- **1** county page linked to a "legal help" website and offered no domestic violence instructions or forms.

14% of 88 counties

placed the Supreme Court of Ohio's protection order forms on their websites, 2 with broken links.

5 county pages

had *no mention* of domestic violence anywhere on their websites.

6 county pages

required that a survivor come to the court, request forms and documents for aid, fill out the forms with a victims' assistance organization, and provided no further instruction on submission.

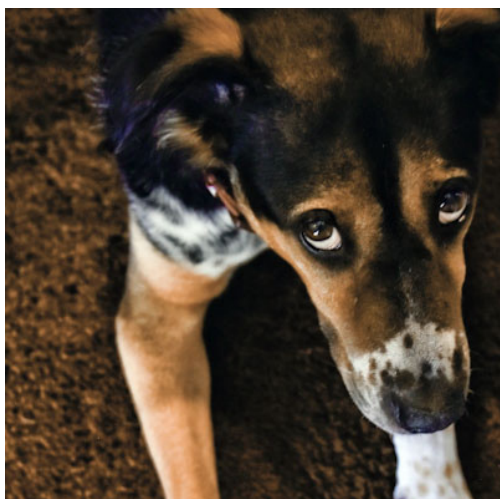
26% of 88 counties

did *not include any* ex-parte applications or form of protection orders online and had no reference on where to find them.

ANIMAL ABUSE

In a household where domestic violence is present, other forms of abuse are common, including animal abuse. Individuals who harm people are highly likely to use family pets as a means of controlling their partners and/or their children, sometimes maiming or killing animals in front of them to instill fear and exact compliance. Abusers will also use threats of harm towards the animal to manipulate a survivor into remaining in the house. Survivors often attempt to rehome their pets to save their lives before it is too late or attempt to find a domestic violence shelter or safe haven that will accept both themselves and their pets. This link between the two forms of abuse is well documented and was recognized in 2014 by the Ohio General Assembly when it enacted—and Governor Kasich signed—*Senate Bill 177*, empowering courts to issue protection orders covering pets.

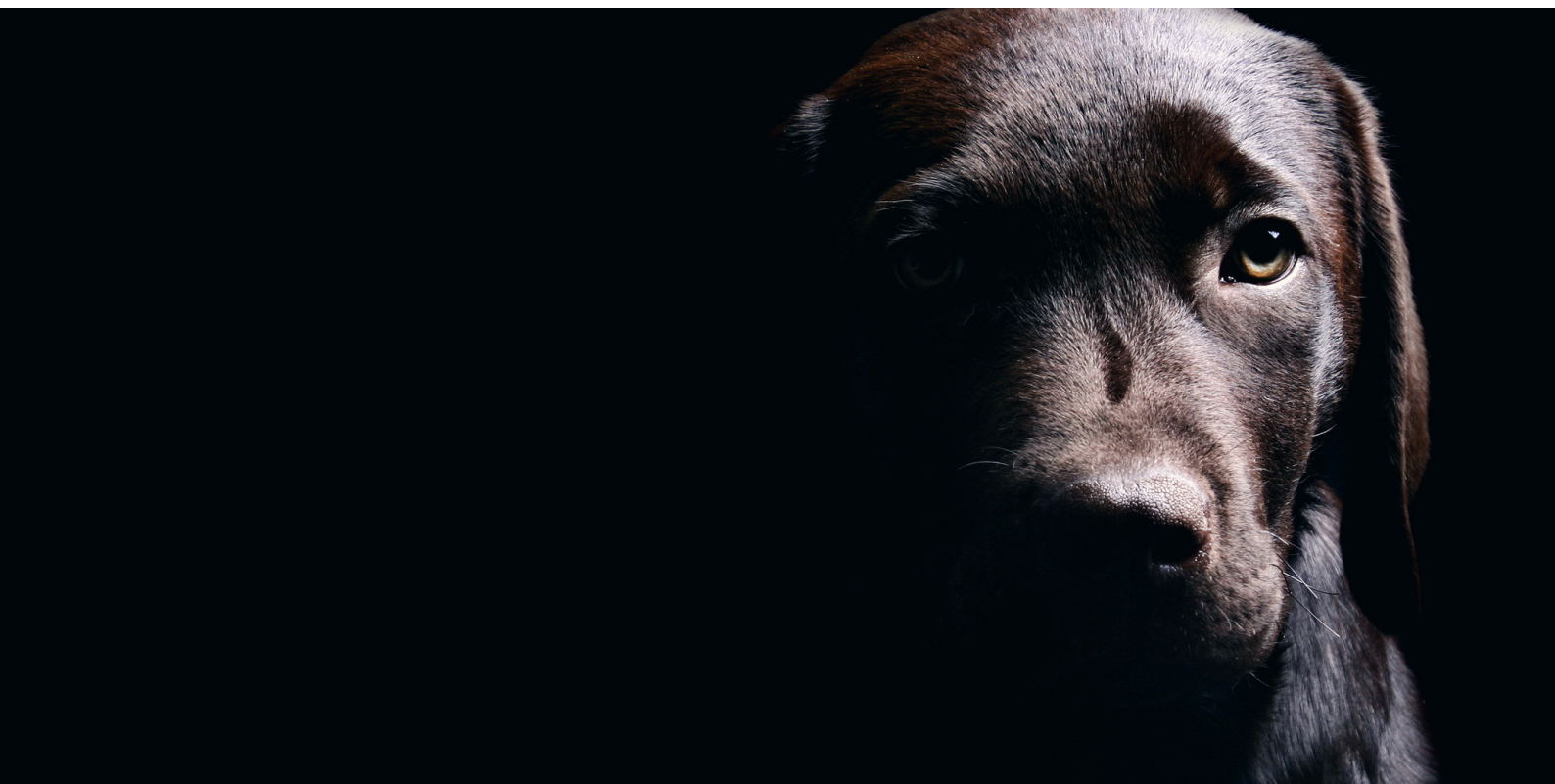
The assessment was conducted by visiting each county's webpage offering animal resources, websites of humane societies, and the *Animal Welfare Institute's* list of Safe Havens (a listing of services to assist with housing domestic violence survivors' pets). Data results are to the right.



49% of 88 counties

housed a safe haven or had reciprocity agreements with a county that had a safe haven. (*Note: information on availability was not provided*).

- **3 of 88** counties included pets on their protection order forms. They included pets as a separate section, not under “property.” (*Note: at the time of this analysis, pets were not included on the Ohio Supreme Court protection form. Effective 4/15/2021, protection forms include pets*).
- **1** county included a separate “instruction” page that explained how to include pets on the protection order request.
- **12** counties listed having a dog pound, dog warden, or dog shelter.
- **1 of 88** counties mentioned aiding farm animals, specifically horses.
- **67** counties listed having a humane society, 7 of which had inactive links, Facebook sites, and social media.
- **5** counties had more than one safe haven.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving access to protections for domestic violence survivors.

For Ohio to become proactive in assisting domestic violence survivors, it is critical that both state and local policymakers be educated in the different forms of abuse and control occurring within the domestic violence household.

Ohio must become a leader in providing appropriate access to protection for victims.

Ohio must provide additional legislative responses to ensure protection for both human and non-human victims of abuse.

Ultimately, Ohio should make significant revisions to its treatment of those who experience domestic violence. Below, 10 recommendations are presented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Provide a consistent procedure in applying for protection orders.

The process of applying for a protection order should be consistent throughout Ohio. The process must be simple and easily accessible. Those who live or are in a relationship with an abuser will not necessarily be able to drive to a court to request an application packet, schedule a time to meet with a victims' advocate to fill out the paperwork, or pay for a notarized document. The process of obtaining protection must accommodate the living experiences of those who have their actions, finances, and movements controlled.

2) Require each county to provide information and protection order applications on their County website.

The law requires that individuals who apply for protection do so in the county of their residence. Counties that do not provide information or applications to their residents are single-handedly denying their residents protection from abusers.

Each individual county must provide educational information and options for legal protection for survivors, and treatment programs for abusers. This information must be easily accessible and available in multiple formats and languages (i.e., hard copy; at multiple locations; online; accessible for non-English speakers).



RECOMMENDATIONS

3) Create a direct entry petition for a protection order form.

The State of Ohio can launch the move towards process conformity and accessible aid by creating a direct online entry protection order form that allows a petitioner to enter information online, which will go directly to the courts. The form should be available on each county website in addition to the state website. It must include the full and revised county protection order, which includes pets, and suggested guidance for legal aid. The direct entry information should then go directly to the courts and/or a victims' advocate, and law enforcement.

4) All websites including domestic violence information should have a "safe exit".

Shelters and social welfare agencies that serve survivors have a safe exit button on their websites so that a survivor doesn't need to close multiple screens when needing to exit quickly. This would preclude the abuser from pulling up the survivor's browsing history to see visits to the site. The county and state websites that house protection orders should offer the same protection.



RECOMMENDATIONS

5) Consider protection order application reciprocity.

The county a petitioner resides in is a venue issue. Allowing a petitioner to apply in other counties will enhance safety and recognize the need for a petitioner to apply in a county they do not reside in. The State of Ohio allows for county reciprocity for drivers' licenses, registration and plates, and concealed weapon permit applications; yet does not allow individuals to request protection orders outside their county of domicile. This must be remedied by allowing a petitioner reciprocity in the same way the court has determined citizens can apply for deadly weapon permits from any county adjacent to their home county.

6) Create a safe haven that can accept farm animals or consider partnering with rescues that can temporarily house them.

Many counties in Ohio are rural and consist of agricultural areas. Thus, there is a need for sanctuaries for farm animals as well. Ohio can begin creating a network of safe

places for farm animals to be temporarily or permanently housed via social media, the construction of a new safe haven that is specifically designed for farm animals, or by creating partnerships with established farm sanctuaries.

7) Continue video conferencing for domestic violence aid or protection orders.

Domestic relations courts have either shut down or have been using Zoom, offering limited access during the pandemic.

Indeed, many civil and criminal courts have operated successfully by Zoom and other live webcasts. This can be continued within the protection courts, and may be better as victims would be separated from their abusers. The trauma of having to be present in person for survivors is harmful to their health and healing. Allowing remote access would assist the courts in trauma-informed actions with survivors. Such an option should be available even after pandemic restrictions are lifted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8) Partner with the *Department of Public Safety* (ODPS) and the *Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy* (OPTA) to create a training course or certification to educate law enforcement and court personnel on the link between domestic violence and animal abuse, proper domestic violence responses, updated forms, legislation, and enforcement via eOPOTA.

Agencies such as the *Justice Clearinghouse* offer law enforcement modules focused on responding to and investigating domestic violence and animal abuse cases, but these opportunities may not reach everyone and they do not offer certification. Partnering with ODPS and OPOTA to make this training available to all law enforcement and court personnel via eOPOTA would enable all members of Ohio public safety staff to attend the training, allow for the State to mandate the training, or result in officers receiving certification for attendance. While it would not be possible for fire first responders to access eOPOTA, consideration must be paid to enabling all first responders in Ohio to obtain this education.

- 9) Increase the number of shelters that accept pets.

There are a limited number of domestic violence shelters that take animals; yet one of the abuser's easiest and most effective tools for controlling the survivor (plus children and dependents) is the abuse of a beloved pet. Shelters must either begin to accept pets, partner with other agencies that can temporarily house or permanently rehome a pet, or provide resources that enable survivors to protect their pets. Information as well as technical and some financial assistance are available through organizations such as *Red Rover*, *Petsmart Charities*, *Sheltering Animals and Families Together* (SAF-T), and the federal *Protecting Animals with Shelter* (PAWS) program. More information about safe havens is also available through *Ohio Animal Advocates* resource lists and the *Animal Welfare Institute's Safe Haven Project*. It is vital that Ohio provide more opportunities for survivors to escape with their pets and fund opportunities for more safe haven options throughout the state.

RECOMMENDATIONS



10) Request that the *Ohio State Highway Patrol* modify the current protection order module to allow for pets to be included in the *Law Enforcement Automated Data System* (LEADS) and require agencies to enter said data.

Protected persons are entered into the LEADS system and additional protection order information is currently only available by law enforcement request. The *Ohio State Highway Patrol* programs controls the LEADS system and can modify this to include an option for protected pets to also be placed in the system. Unless animals are added directly to the database, an officer on scene would not know that the pet was protected and must therefore be kept with the survivor and away from the abuser. Instant notification via LEADS would quickly provide officers with necessary information and result in the avoidance of harm to the pet.