

Responding to family violence: The role of council animal management

Animal abuse and family violence

Men's violence is the leading contributor of preventable death, injury and illness among Victorian women aged 15 to 45¹. Women are most likely to experience violence from an intimate male partner or other family member. In 2014, Victoria Police responded to over 65,000 reports of family violence². In Australia, more than one woman is murdered every week by a current or former partner³.

The link between animal abuse and family violence has long been recognised. Pets—including dogs, cats and other animals—are often regarded as 'members of the family'. Threatening to harm or kill pets is a method used by some violent men as a means to control their partners⁴. According to a recent study, one in three women who had experienced violence from a partner had delayed leaving their partner because of fear for a pet's safety⁵.

Animal abuse is also a known family violence risk indicator. A woman whose partner has threatened to abuse pets is five times more likely to experience family violence⁶. The Victoria Police Code of Practice for Investigating Family Violence and the Common Risk Assessment Framework (CRAF) used by family violence workers in Victoria both recognise pet abuse as increasing a woman's risk of being seriously harmed or killed.

A role for animal management teams in responding to family violence

Since family violence is prevalent—and there is a clear relationship between family violence and animal abuse—local laws officers who attend households for animal management issues are likely to encounter signs of family violence.



Case Study: the City of Casey

In 2012, local laws officers in the City of Casey attended a property to remove two dogs. The owner of the dogs, a pregnant woman, pleaded with the officers not to take the animals, saying her partner would be angry to see the dogs gone when he returned home. She said her partner would blame her and may become violent. Not seeing a way around this, the officers took the dogs.

This incident prompted the City of Casey to review their animal management practices. They realised that their officers were well-placed to recognise warning signs of family violence. Local laws officers were given information about the prevalence of family violence, and undertook training to be able to recognise the signs and respond appropriately.

As well as training officers in identifying family violence, the City of Casey has: included family violence response in local laws officer procedures, trained officers to look for signs of violence towards pets, equipped officers to refer women to family violence services and offered victims of family violence housing for pets, during family relocation.

For their efforts, the City of Casey's local laws team were awarded the LGPro Service Delivery Initiative Award in 2014.



What are councils doing today?

Since 2012, the City of Casey has been sharing their experience with councils across Victoria, encouraging local laws teams to build capacity in recognising and responding to family violence.

More than two hundred local laws officers have participated in Identifying Family Violence (IFV) training. Sessions have been held across Victoria in **Ararat, Bendigo, Latrobe, Wellington, Yarriambiack, Darebin and Moreland**.

Victorian councils have also begun work to address family violence through their animal management plans.

Wyndham City Council's Domestic Animal Management Plan 2013-2016 has made Identifying Family Violence training mandatory for animal management officers from 2014⁷.

Moreland City Council's Domestic Animal Management Plan 2013-2017 states that the council offers free housing for animals where this is needed to support a woman leaving violence⁸.

1 VicHealth (2004) *The Health Costs of Violence: Measuring the Burden of Disease Caused by Intimate Partner Violence. A Summary of Findings*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.

2 Victoria Police (2013) *Crime Statistics Official Release 2012/13*, Victoria Police, Melbourne.

3 Chan & Payne (2013) *Homicide in Australia: 2009/10 National Homicide Monitoring Program Annual Report*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

4 Tiplady C.M., Walsh D.B. and Philips C.J.C. (2012) "Intimate partner violence and companion animal welfare". *Australian Veterinary Journal* 90: 1-2. p48.

5 Volant, A.M. et.al. (2008) "The Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse". *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 23:9. p12.

6 Ibid.

7 Wyndham City Council, *Domestic Animal Management Plan 2013-2016* p6.

8 Moreland City Council, *Domestic Animal Management Plan 2013-17*, p25.

For more information, contact the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV)

(03) 9667 5585 or knagle@mav.asn.au



Getting started: how your council can respond to family violence through animal management policies and practices

Offer Identifying Family Violence training to your local laws officers:

Identifying Family Violence (IFV) training (including level 1 CRAF) will equip local laws officers to be able to identify where women may be experiencing or are at risk of family violence. It will also equip them with the knowledge and confidence to make an appropriate referral. IFV training can be arranged through your family violence services Regional Integration Coordinator:

<http://thelookout.org.au/sector-info/what-integrated-fv-sector/regional-integration-coordinators-rics>

Find out what you can offer:

Many councils are able to offer some form of free accommodation for pets while women are experiencing violence or attempting to leave violent partners. Women's refuges in Victoria are unable to accommodate pets—knowing that their pets are safe can help women make the decision to leave violent situations.

Updating your animal management plan:

Animal management plans should include a reference to family violence and relevant policies and procedures. Appropriate training for officers and provisions for pet-owning residents who have experienced violence can be included in these plans.

Work with other areas of council:

Other areas of council, including health and wellbeing areas, are working on preventing violence against women. Different areas of council can support one another and share their ideas and experiences.

Find out more:

Be informed about family violence statistics in your council area and ongoing work to address and prevent it. You could start by accessing the Municipal Association of Victoria's Councils Preventing Violence Against Women series of info sheets, available at:

<http://www.mav.asn.au/policy-services/social-community/gender-equity>