

# Responding to family violence: the role of animal management

## Animal abuse and family violence

Violence against women is preventable. However, it is a serious and widespread problem in Australia. On average:

- one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner
- almost 10 women a day are hospitalised for injuries perpetrated by a partner
- one in four women have experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner.
- women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence than women without disabilities<sup>1</sup>.

In 2018-19, Victoria Police responded to over 82,600 reports of family violence<sup>2</sup>.

Harming and/or killing animals – or threatening to do so – is a form of family violence<sup>3,4</sup>. This includes pets, assistance and farm animals. Women with disabilities who rely on assistance animals, such as guide dogs for their independence are particularly vulnerable<sup>5</sup>.

Fear for an animal's safety can cause women experiencing violence to delay leaving.<sup>6,7</sup>

Barriers to women leaving violent partners include lack of accommodation or housing that allow animals and the prohibitive cost of boarding animals (particularly horses).

## Animal management teams and family violence

Animal abuse is a form of family violence; it is also a risk factor for family violence.

A woman whose partner has threatened to abuse her pets is five times more likely to experience family violence.

The risk assessment tools used by Victoria Police and Victorian family violence workers recognise animal abuse as increasing a woman's risk of experiencing violence<sup>9</sup>.

It is highly likely that local laws officers attending properties for animal management issues will also encounter family violence.

## Case Study: 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. Realising their local laws officers were well-placed to recognise the signs of family violence, they developed an innovative model which included:

- training to help officers understand family violence and identify risk
- establishing referral pathways
- developing partnerships with the local Police Family Violence Unit
- updating policies and standard operating procedures
- supporting housing of animals at risk during periods of family relocation following family violence incidents

City of Casey was the first council in Australia to respond to the link between animal abuse and family violence<sup>8</sup>. Officers shared their experiences with councils across Victoria, encouraging other local laws teams to learn how to recognise and respond to family violence.



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## Case Study: Epping Animal Welfare Facility

In December 2015, the cities of Darebin, Moreland and Whittlesea entered into an agreement to develop and operate a regional pound in Epping.

The RSPCA was appointed to operate the facility which opened in October 2017.

The three councils are committed to supporting residents impacted by family violence.

Recognising that women experiencing family violence often delay leaving because they fear for their pet's safety, they developed a joint Domestic Animal Welfare Policy<sup>10</sup>. This policy provides a framework for managing requests for temporary boarding of cats and dogs at the Epping Animal Welfare Facility.

Councils may opt to cover costs, as is the case with Moreland – which provides free boarding for 7 to 10 days under its Safe Haven for Pets program<sup>11</sup>.

## How to: respond to family violence through animal management policies and practices

### Provide Family Violence training

This training should equip local laws officers with the skills to identify where women may be experiencing or are at risk of family violence. It should also equip them with the knowledge and confidence to make an appropriate referral. For more information contact [training@edvos.org.au](mailto:training@edvos.org.au)

### Find out what you can offer

Many councils can 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.

### Update your animal management plan

Include reference to family violence and relevant council policies in your animal management plan. Appropriate training for officers and provisions for pet-owning residents who have experienced violence can also be included in this plan.

### Work with other areas of council

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

**Find out more:** Be informed about family violence statistics in your council area and ongoing work to address and prevent it. Visit [www.mav.asn.au/policy-services/socialcommunity/gender-equity](http://www.mav.asn.au/policy-services/socialcommunity/gender-equity)



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<sup>1</sup> Our Watch [www.ourwatch.org.au/quick-facts/](http://www.ourwatch.org.au/quick-facts/). Accessed 2.10.20.

<sup>2</sup> Crime Statistics Agency [www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/family-violence-data-portal/family-violence-data-dashboard/victoria-police](http://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/family-violence-data-portal/family-violence-data-dashboard/victoria-police). Accessed 2.10.20.

<sup>3</sup> Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic) s5(2)

<sup>4</sup> National Domestic and Family Violence Bench Book <https://dfvbenchbook.aija.org.au/understanding-domestic-and-family-violence/animal-abuse/>. Accessed 2.10.20.

<sup>5</sup> Harpur, P. & Douglas, H. 'Disability and Domestic Violence: Protecting Survivors' Human Rights' (2015) 23(3) *Griffith Law Review* 405.

<sup>6</sup> Roguski, M. 'Pets as Pawns: The Co-existence of Animal Cruelty and Family Violence' (Report, Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Volant, A.M., et al, 'The Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse: An Australian Study' (2008) 23(9) *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 1277.

<sup>8</sup> [www.casey.vic.gov.au/policies-strategies/family-violence-prevention-strategy](http://www.casey.vic.gov.au/policies-strategies/family-violence-prevention-strategy). Accessed 2.10.2020.

<sup>9</sup> Victoria Police, Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence [www.police.vic.gov.au/code-practice-investigation-family-violence](http://www.police.vic.gov.au/code-practice-investigation-family-violence). Accessed 2.10.2020.

<sup>10</sup> [www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/media/5318/domestic-animal-welfare-support-policy-20190903.pdf](http://www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/media/5318/domestic-animal-welfare-support-policy-20190903.pdf). Accessed 6.10.2020

<sup>11</sup> [www.moreland.vic.gov.au/globalassets/areas/local-laws/domestic-animal-management-plan-2017-2021.pdf](http://www.moreland.vic.gov.au/globalassets/areas/local-laws/domestic-animal-management-plan-2017-2021.pdf). Accessed 6.10.2020