

**Inside the Cruelty Connection:  
The Role of Animals in Decision-Making  
by Domestic Violence Victims in Rural Alberta**

**Research Report to the  
Alberta SPCA**

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First and foremost, it took the courage of those who were willing to contribute their very personal experiences. Although they cannot be named, we are grateful to the almost 300 women who responded to the survey and the 17 who participated in an in-depth interview. As one participant reasoned:

The interview is a good thing, because if it helps other people, or helps keep pets safe, or saves another person, it would be worth it.

We hope it will indeed, be worth it.

Someone must have an initial vision that a project is necessary and in this case, provide the funding, for it to come to fruition. Sincere thanks to the Alberta SPCA and in particular Tim Battle, Director of Education, for the financial, professional and personal support.

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- A Safe Place, Sherwood Park, Alberta
- Camrose Women's Shelter Society, Camrose, Alberta
- Harbour House (YWCA), Lethbridge, Alberta
- Odyssey House, Grande Prairie, Alberta
- Wellspring Family Resource and Crisis Centre, Whitecourt, Alberta

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- Safe Pet Manitoba/Manitoba Veterinary Medical Association
- YWCA of Calgary



## Executive Summary

Although the experiences of women living with domestic violence have been investigated through many qualitative and quantitative research studies, less is known about the effect of the presence of animals on their decision making. Women, with or without children, face numerous emotional, financial and logistical barriers to safely leaving an abusive situation. Previous anecdotal evidence indicated that concerns about the fate of companion animals or livestock could be an additional barrier to making the decision to leave. Given the high prevalence of animal ownership in Alberta, as well as the high rate of reported domestic violence, studying the relationships between these two factors and women's ability to leave an abusive situation seemed relevant. Hence, the study that follows was commissioned by the Alberta SPCA in June of 2010, to help guide their initiatives in this area.

The project had as its specific goals investigating the following questions, with a particular focus on the rural environment:

- Are there impacts on the decision making of domestic violence victims in Alberta which are created specifically through their ownership of companion animals or livestock?
- Are children also impacted, and in what ways?
- What might be the implications, if any, for the organization and others of the findings of the study?

The study had both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Questionnaire responses from 296 women residing in five rural/suburban Alberta women's shelters during the period from December, 2010 through to July, 2011 provided the quantitative data. Women who agreed to participate first answered basic demographic questions. If they had companion animals or livestock, they were asked further questions regarding the specifics of their situation with regard to those animals. Their responses were analyzed through a cascade of ever-narrowing filters, including the presence or absence of children in the home, and the presence or absence of threat or actual harm to the animals.

The second part of the study consisted of qualitative interviews with a variety of participants who could inform the research by having lived through such a situation personally, or by providing service to those women who have. 14 women who left domestic violence and had animals at the time, three now-adult children of such women, and 20 different service providers all provided data. This data was analyzed and coded into a variety of themes, and then compared to and combined with the quantitative data where relevant.

The quantitative and qualitative data does not in any way represent the beliefs and experiences of all rural women who attempt to escape domestic violence with animals as part of their many considerations. However, there is sufficient consistency in the voices of the study participants, and those of the service providers, to provide preliminary answers to the questions posed by the study.

In response to the *first question* above, the results of this study imply that **decision making regarding leaving an abusive situation was negatively impacted by the presence of companion animals, and**



**perhaps to an even greater degree, by the ownership of livestock.** Some exceptions to this finding might be made for aboriginal women, who have a much lesser degree of individual animal ownership than the general population, and for refugee/immigrant women who appeared so seldom at the participating women's shelters that no conclusions can be drawn about them as a sub-group.

Of those women who had animals and responded to the relevant questions, 35.82% had animals that were subject to threats or actual harm. 79.16% of respondents whose animals were threatened believed it was possible that the threats could be carried out. Of the 48 respondents whose animals had experienced threats or harm, 41 (85.4%) indicated actual acts of harm had occurred. 39.39% of women whose animals had been subject to threats or harm knew their animals remained in unsafe conditions upon leaving, but left anyway for personal safety and other reasons. Of those who responded to the question, a clear majority of 58.87% delayed leaving, representing a mixed group of those whose animals were threatened or harmed, and those who simply had responsibility for the animals. Of the 31 respondents who had animals that had actually been threatened or harmed and answered the question, 74.19% delayed leaving, a significant number for that specific group.

It was evident from the qualitative interviews that the presence of companion animals and livestock was of great importance in the lives of women and their children. Control through the animals as a form of abuse and a means of preventing women and their children from leaving was so frequently noted that it was coded and themed separately. The victims interviewed made it very clear that, for women with animals they wished to protect by bringing them with as they left, solutions and assistance were not easy to find. The participants as a whole believed that many rural or farm women, especially those with livestock, were so affected by their circumstances that they simply did not, or could not, leave. This belief was true of respondents whether or not this was their personal experience.

Responses to this first research questions from service providers were similar to those of the victims themselves. They believed animals were viewed by the women as part of the family. Women did not want to leave without them and they would put themselves at risk by either staying when it was unsafe to do so, or going back to get their animals when it was also unsafe. In general, service providers believed at least some client decision making was impacted by fear and anxiety about their animals; fear of leaving them, and fear of taking them with. Women were often seen to be in a forced-choice situation, having to choose among their own safety, the best interests of their children, and the future of their animals.

In response to the *second question* above, **it seems clear that children are impacted by the same situations as their mothers. These effects are negative, and appear to be both long and short term in nature.** 55.74% of women in the women's shelters were accompanied by children and 25.33% also had animals prior to leaving the abusive situation. Potentially, one quarter of children at the women's shelters had been affected, at minimum, by separation from and anxiety about their animals.

Although most women reported trying to shield their children from both human and animal violence, they also reported a wide variety of effects on their children from witnessing. It is likely this represents an under-reporting of what children really observed or felt, as some things likely remain unknown to, or



denied by, the adult interviewees. A variety of social/emotional symptoms were observed in the children including fear, anxiety, sadness and loss of control. Interviewees whose children were now old enough to be in their own relationships believed that such relationships were being affected negatively by past experiences with both human and animal violence. For the three child witnesses who were interviewed as adults, encountering animal and human violence as children meant they suffered both short and long-term personal repercussions as a result.

Every service provider expressed the belief that witnessing human and animal abuse as a child was devastating for the child on many levels. Effects included but were not limited to: worrying about the care and safety of animals left with the abuser; missing the animals' emotional companionship; feeling guilty about not saving them; and fear of never seeing them again.

Data received in response to the *third question* resulted in two implications. First, **there is a role to be played by humane societies in addressing the findings of the study.** Second is the corollary; **given the interconnected nature of the issues surrounding human and animal abuse, no one agency can possibly do the necessary work on their own, nor would it be advantageous to try.** Medical, veterinary, social service/mental health, government, education, justice and policing agencies, to list but a few, would need to be part of any workable solution through the formation of multi-disciplinary, community based partnerships.

The list of possible inter-agency links provided by both interviewees and professionals was extremely broad and inclusive. The following are the top 10 most often identified needs:

- Professional training regarding the links between human and animal cruelty for all those likely to come in contact with adults, children or animals that have been abused.
- Cross-training and cross-referral policies between animal, human and judicial/enforcement professionals. Each profession would need to make clear what the restrictions and prohibitions are for their work and engage collaboratively to remove unnecessary barriers to working together.
- Inquiry by all professionals, where it would be relevant, as to whether a presenting abused adult or child has animals, whether those animals have been threatened or harmed, and if they are attempting to leave, whether concern for the animals cause them additional anxiety.
- Including arrangements for animals in all safety or outcomes planning for domestic violence victims attempting to leave abusive relationships, wherever possible.
- Partnerships between human service and animal service organizations to assist in finding solutions to the animal placement problem for domestic violence victims who are trying to leave or recover from abusive situations.
- Legislative, policing and judicial changes to enable long term improvements for domestic violence victims and their animals in abusive situations. Such changes would need to be backed by political will.
- Specific and focused assistance plans for domestic violence victims from rural and farm environments, which are different and perhaps more difficult to leave than urban or metropolitan environments.



- School and educator involvement as partners in pro-active education and reporting of possible abuse of children, adults or animals, given their access to children on a daily basis.
- Addressing victims' lack of knowledge about the nature of abuse and the resources available through a cooperative multi-agency focus.
- Assistance for domestic violence victims leaving abusive situations in finding housing that will take animals.

In summary, the results of this study indicate that much could and should be done to assist women and children needing to leave an abusive situation while simultaneously caring for and about their animals. Realistically, little is likely to happen that has a major and lasting impact unless it is facilitated through a multi-faceted, multi-organization approach. Were such efforts supported by political will and resources, as they are in some provinces, chances of success would be even higher. Humane societies generally, and the Alberta SPCA in particular, are well positioned to begin laying the foundations for such work in Alberta.





# Contents

**Acknowledgements..... i**

**Executive Summary.....iii**  
 List of Figures ..... ix

**Section 1. Introduction and Methodology.....1**  
 Introduction ..... 1  
 Background to the Study..... 2  
 General Methodology ..... 3

**Section 2. Quantitative Research Findings .....12**  
 Level 1: Overview of Respondents in Relation to Pet or Animal Ownership..... 12  
 Level 2: Analysis of Harm in Animal Related Contexts..... 15  
 Level 3: Analysis of Effects of Harm or Threat of Harm to Animals..... 17  
 Qualitative Comments from Questionnaire..... 23  
 Summary ..... 26

**Section 3. Qualitative Research Findings: Interviews with Women .....28**  
 Demographics: Participants ..... 28  
 Abuse in Background ..... 30  
 Demographics: Animals ..... 32  
 Importance of Animals..... 34  
 Partner Abuse of Animals ..... 37  
 Control Through Animals ..... 38  
 Children and Animal Abuse..... 40  
 Rural Factors ..... 42  
 Farm Factors ..... 44  
 Reserve Factors..... 45  
 Women’s Lack of Knowledge ..... 46  
 Leaving ..... 47  
 Role of Friends and Family ..... 51  
 Housing and Animals..... 52  
 Role of Service Providers ..... 53  
 Giving Back Through Animals..... 61  
 Summary ..... 61

**Section 4. Qualitative Research Findings: Interviews with Witnesses.....63**  
 Introduction ..... 63



Demographics ..... 63

Role of Animals ..... 64

Treatment of Animals ..... 65

Animal Abuse Witnessed ..... 66

Emotional Effect..... 67

Coping Mechanisms as Child..... 69

Residual/Current Effects of Witnessing Abuse: Personal ..... 71

Effects of Witnessing Abuse as Adult: Animals..... 72

Summary ..... 73

**Section 5. Qualitative Research Findings: Interviews with Service Providers .....75**

Types of Participants..... 75

Demographics ..... 75

Importance of Animals to Clients..... 77

Partner Abuse of Animals ..... 77

Control of Clients Through Animals ..... 78

Children and Animals ..... 79

Rural Factors ..... 81

Impact of Farm Environment for Clients..... 81

Impact of Reserve Environment for Clients ..... 82

Lack of Knowledge ..... 83

Impact of Animals on Clients’ Decision Making..... 84

Housing Implications for Clients ..... 85

Staff and Animals ..... 86

Legal and Related Issues ..... 86

Accommodations for Animals..... 88

Summary ..... 95

**Section 6. Conclusions and Recommendations.....97**

Conclusions ..... 97

Implications..... 100

Summary ..... 102

**Section 7. References .....104**



## List of Figures

Figure 1. Presence of Animals and Children in Relation to Total Number of Participants ..... 13

Figure 2. Aboriginal Women Participants and Animal Ownership ..... 14

Figure 3. Threat/Harm to Animals and Presence of Children in Relation to Animal-Owning Participants 15

Figure 4. Role of Threat/Harm for Animal-Owning Participants ..... 18

Figure 5. Afraid to Get Help: Animal-Owning Participants ..... 19



## Section 1. Introduction and Methodology

### Introduction

This research report was commissioned by the Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Alberta SPCA), an organization which has a long standing interest in animal welfare. Specifically, Tim Battle, Director of Education was aware of both other research (listed in the reference section of this report) as well as anecdotal accounts from social service and other professionals that led him to believe domestic violence victims' decision making with regard to leaving abusive situations might be impacted by the presence of companion animals and livestock. The broader connection between animal and human abuse, has been noted in past research:

There have literally been only a handful of studies examining the relationship between animal abuse and woman battering. The first published in 1998, and the most recent, which came out in 2007, were both conducted by Frank Ascione... A connection between pet abuse and woman-battering has been empirically established. (Flynn, 2009, p. 117)

Given the Alberta SPCA's focus on the entire province – particularly rural areas - the research questions became:

- Are there impacts on the decision making of domestic violence victims in Alberta which are created specifically through their ownership of companion animals or livestock?
- Are children also impacted, and in what ways?
- What might be the implications, if any, for the organization and others of the findings of the study?

This report presents the findings and resultant recommendations from both a quantitative and qualitative investigation into the above stated questions. In the process of gathering and analyzing the data, much was also revealed about the general nature of domestic abuse. These findings will not be presented in this paper, unless they are directly related to the questions under investigation. However, the authors have permission and intend to use this data sub-set in subsequent publications.

Given the focus on rural Alberta, five rural and suburban women's shelters were the source of all the quantitative data and the majority of the qualitative data that was generated (see methodology). In general, these shelters serve women fleeing domestic abuse; some also serve women with mental health or housing needs. In addition to women from rural settings, urban-based women may end up in a rural women's shelter for a variety of reasons, and aboriginal women from reserve homes form a significant percentage of the residents at any time in Alberta.

The quantitative research was intended to first determine, over the period December, 2010 through to July, 2011, who was making use of each shelter's in-residence services and also had companion animals



or livestock. Of those residents, what was the general nature of their experiences previous to, during and upon leaving, related to the animals?

The qualitative research was originally designed to investigate in depth the experiences of women whose decision making had been impacted by the presence of companion animals and livestock. In addition, ethics approval was received to interview children grade 6 and up who had fled with these women, if they and their mothers were willing. However, as will become evident in the methodology section, no children were interviewed. No one refused. Rather, few children in this age group accompanied parents to a participating women's shelter during the time of the study and no candidates emerged over the six months. Instead, 3 women who were child survivors were interviewed, as were a selection of women's shelter staff that had interacted with such children over time.

A variety of professionals, whose work intersects either with women fleeing domestic violence or animal welfare or both, were also interviewed. Their reflections and first hand experiences form the fourth part of the data and findings. Their views assisted greatly in putting the findings in perspective, adding anecdotal data and generating the recommendations.

This report was not intended to have a fulsome literature review or compare all projects and organizations serving women in abusive situations who have companion animals or livestock. Reference is made to previous studies as they are relevant to this data set. Articles and books that may be of interest to those in the field are included in the reference section. Similarly, some existing programs in Alberta and Canada which are directly aligned with the research question are discussed where it is useful to do so.

## Background to the Study

The information that follows is offered as background to the study and derived from the most recent Statistics Canada or Government of Alberta reports for each topic unless otherwise noted.

Statistics Canada and the Alberta government both report Alberta to be a generally urban province. The most recent census reports 614, 855 of Alberta's 3,645,257 residents to be rural, or 16.86% ([www12.statcan.gc.ca](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca)). In 2006, Alberta Agriculture reported that there were 50, 000 farms in Alberta, second only to Ontario. These range from small family operations to large commercial ventures, as well as religiously based farm cooperatives ([www.agric.gov.ab.ca](http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca)). With a total provincial area of more than 255,000 square miles, in practical terms, rural can mean an hour away from services and shopping to totally inaccessible except by plane in winter.

Alberta is second only to Saskatchewan in reported domestic violence. Almost 9% of the female population self-reported to Statistics Canada in 2009 that they had been physically or sexually victimized by a current or former spouse within the last five years ([www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca)). Those who self-identify as an Aboriginal person were reported in 2009 to be almost twice as likely to be the victims of spousal violence as those who did not ([www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca)). Those who identified themselves as a visible minority or an immigrant were not found to be associated with higher levels of reported spousal



violence, but were also less likely to report than non-immigrants. Other socio-demographic factors, such as household income and education levels, were also found to have little impact on experiencing spousal violence ([www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca).)

In the same 2009 report, 28% of domestic violence victims reported contacting or using a formal service, such as a counsellor or psychologist. This means of course, that the data on this topic represents the tip of the iceberg, as the vast majority of victims are not reporting, and for the purposes of this study, not appearing at shelters, with or without animals. On any given day in Canada, about 3000 children are living in women's shelters with their mothers and over two-thirds are under age 10 ([www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca).)

A variety of sources were consulted to determine general companion animal and livestock ownership. No data was found for livestock. Approximately 50% of Canadians own a pet; 30% own a dog, and 28% own at least one cat. The Ontario Veterinary Medical Association suggests that the cost of caring for an adult dog is \$1856 yearly, a cat \$1442, with kittens and puppies costing significantly more ([www.ovma.org/pdf/fifi\\_fido\\_finances11.pdf](http://www.ovma.org/pdf/fifi_fido_finances11.pdf)).

Related specifically to this study, 21% of dog owners in one study maintained that their dog understands them better than their spouse or any other key person in their surroundings (*Firme Compas for Ralston Purina, February 1999*). Further, 78% of dog owners in a different study considered their dog an "equal member" of their family (*Dogs and Travel: An Attitudinal Study of Dog Owners by Starwood Hotels & Resorts conducted by Lieberman Research Worldwide, 2003*). If this is even close to reality, it is likely that those same 'family members' might play a role in victims' decision making with regard to leaving an abusive situation.

## General Methodology

The Alberta SPCA has long desired to conduct such a study, and in order to reference a comparative piece of research, drew on the expertise of an earlier work, that of Drs. Deborah Doherty and Jennie Hornosty: *Exploring the Links; Firearms, Family Violence and Animal Abuse in Rural Communities (2008)*. There was interest on the part of the Alberta SPCA to investigate some of the same topics involving animals in Alberta. After careful study of this and other relevant literature, email, phone and personal meetings were set up with Dr. Doherty to discuss possible methodology for this project. Similarly, conversations were held with representatives of the two major women's shelters in Calgary to get input and feedback at these initial stages. As urban shelters, they would not be future participants. Potential rural women's shelter participants were contacted to gauge their general interest and willingness to participate.

A mixed methodology approach was undertaken, similar to the above named study. Both questionnaire and interview topics and questions were designed, reviewed, and revised based on feedback from professionals as well as women and children with no personal experience with the topic, to ensure overall readability and understandability. Appropriate consent forms were developed for the



questionnaire, as well as for interviews with adults, younger and older children. In the end, only the adult forms of these documents were used.

An initial ethics proposal for the University of Calgary was formulated by the two researchers, after first being vetted through a number of professionals in related fields. By late June of 2010 when ethics approval was formally requested from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board, five women's shelters had agreed to participate subject to ethics approval and receiving further more specific information. After minor revisions were completed based on requests from the ethics board, approval to proceed was received on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

The remaining materials were then prepared, piloted, revised and printed: an administration manual for shelter contacts and intake workers who would be administering the questionnaire; a Participation Rate chart; brochures explaining the interview process and purpose for both adults and eligible children; and at a later date when it became evident they might be helpful in recruiting interview candidates, posters for display and invitation. In retrospect, having pull-off tabs with the project phone number on the poster might have been a good addition.

Participating women's shelter Executive Directors were re-contacted and given details as requested. All agreed to continue with the project. During the month of December, 2010, Dr. Crawford visited each site and met with as many staff members as possible. They were walked through the administration manual, introduced to all the materials, told about the interview process, and had their questions or concerns answered. This gave the researcher an opportunity to see each facility, gather data about history and operations, and make personal contact with those people on whose success the project was dependent.

A lead contact was established for each site. Those present at the initial meeting determined which workers would realistically be appropriate to carry out the questionnaire work. Sufficient copies of all materials were left at the shelter, along with 6 months of pre-paid courier envelopes for the return of completed questionnaires. Each facility was also provided with a lock box for consent forms and temporary storage of questionnaires. The lead was requested to collect questionnaires, consents, and participation records regularly and forward the last two items at least monthly. Intake workers were requested to turn in questionnaires daily. All shelters agreed to facilitate the interview process for any willing participants, and provide an interview room when needed.

A dedicated phone was purchased for the project and that number was used on all materials. Similarly, an email address was created just for the project. However, the phone number was not toll-free, which would have been preferable, but cost prohibitive for all of Alberta. Most clients did not have their own phone, and many did not have easy access to a computer. Some women's shelters offered free long distance to all clients, others did not. All agreed they would assist potential interview participants in contacting the researchers, who either responded immediately or returned calls or emails within two days at the longest. It is possible that the extra step of contacting the researchers privately, if for some reason the client did not want assistance from shelter staff, was an inhibitor to participation.



Participating women's shelters were requested to explain and administer the questionnaire to all women who underwent official intake, if the client was willing and appeared able. Those who agreed to participate first had the consent form explained to them and then participated in Part A, the demographic portion of the questionnaire. Part B was intended for those who had companion animals or livestock in their most current relationship. If this was not the case, they were thanked and the questionnaire ended. If they responded yes, the intake worker continued on as far as was relevant to the client's personal situation. Finally, if the client seemed an appropriate interview candidate in the intake worker's view, questionnaire participants were asked at the time or in a future meeting if they would be interested in telling their story to a researcher. If they responded in the positive, potential participants were given a variety of ways to contact the researchers, and encouraged to do so at the time with the intake worker's help.

Although it was requested initially that intake workers read the questions to the participant to ensure understanding and accuracy, it was clear from the questionnaires received that in some cases the women completed it on their own.

Intake workers also recorded relevant comments from the participant, which formed a small bank of qualitative data retrieved from the questionnaires. By the end of June, 2011, the initial desired number of 250 questionnaires had been exceeded. Shelters were sent a letter thanking them for their participation in this phase, a request for all remaining questionnaires to be returned, and a reminder that interviewing would be ongoing until November of 2011. They were requested to offer the brochure and information regarding the interview process to likely candidates, even though they were no longer administering the questionnaire.

Mid-project, when it became evident that just recruiting from the five women's shelters was not likely to produce enough qualified and willing interview subjects, posters were placed in other locations: second stage housing, veterinary and medical offices, social services offices, libraries, and counseling services amongst others. In addition, through the Alberta SPCA, public service announcements regarding the project were placed in relevant publications. In the end, the women interviewed came from a variety of sources. Attempts were made to interview male childhood or adult victims of domestic violence who at the time had animals, but none came forward.

When willing interview participants were identified and contact made, an interview date was set up at their location, within a few days of contact. In some cases, even with this short turn-around, interviewees were no longer in residence for a variety of reasons. Interviews ranged from one to three hours, based on the desire of the interviewee to continue. The interview always took a conversational format using semi-structured questions, with participants understanding that at the end, any topic of interest to the researcher that had not come up naturally in the conversation would be specifically addressed. All women's shelters were willing to provide follow-up counseling, should the interview process cause such to be necessary or desired by the client.

A copy of the ethics approval, questionnaire, interview topics and relevant consent forms are available from the authors.





### ***Women's Shelter Demographics***

Women's shelters were initially asked to participate based on location and previously demonstrated interest in this topic. Five such shelters agreed to participate, 2 in northern Alberta, 2 in central Alberta and one in southern Alberta. Although the size of town they were located in varied, all self-identified as serving a mostly rural population that was not singularly aboriginal.

Women's shelters all have some level of external security in place. In the smaller towns, the location of the shelter is not necessarily a secret. For example, for the initial meeting, the wrong address had been supplied in one location. The taxi driver knew exactly where the women's shelter was and had no problem delivering the researcher there. This being the case, women are sometimes moved to another location for their own safety, and follow-up for interviews could not take place. Other women decide to return home, or quickly find a relative or friend to take them in, and then lose contact with shelter staff. Many of those participating in the questionnaire have multiple admittances to women's shelters.

Participating shelters had anywhere from 10 to 40 beds, with a normal residency of up to 21 days. If they were not full, and a resident needed more time, this was often granted. Normally, this request was made due to lack of suitable post-shelter housing in the area. Participating women's shelters varied in their ability to take older male children with the mother; none took males over the age of 18.

The five women's shelters agreed to participate for fundamentally the same reasons. As described in one of the confirmation of participation letters from an executive director:

We are well aware of the difficulties women experience when their pets are harmed, often it is part of the emotional abuse women are subjected to. We are also aware that it is very difficult for women to move forward when the safety of their pets is threatened by the abuser. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the analysis of the findings, and support any initiative that will provide deeper understanding of this complex issue.

As all women's shelters agreed to be named for this study, what follows is a brief description of each site.

#### ***Wellspring Family Resource and Crisis Centre, Whitecourt***

*"Offers shelter that provides safe, short term accommodation for women in crisis, with or without children."*

- 10 beds, up to 21 day stay
- Residential, outreach, public education and a 24 hour crisis line
- Clients from surrounding area and out of province, 30% First Nations
- Have one kennel in a garage for emergency overnight care



**Harbour House (YWCA), Lethbridge**

*“Committed to women and the enhancement of their lives by providing services, which empower them, support equality and promote wellness in mind, body and spirit.”*

- 24 beds, up to 21 day stay
- Operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- 424 women and 275 children resided 2010-2011
- Offers more than 20 programs through the larger YWCA organization

**Brigantia Place (Camrose Women’s Shelter Society), Camrose**

*“A non-profit organization that exists to assist individuals and families who are experiencing the effects of family violence to work toward a lifestyle free of abuse.”*

- 22 beds, up to 21 days
- 24 hour toll free crisis line, outreach, family support, crisis intervention
- Serves Camrose and surrounding area, often serves as overflow if Edmonton beds are full
- In 2011, served 330 total residents (180 adults 150 children) and 34 outreach families

**A Safe Place, Sherwood Park**

*“To provide crisis intervention in the form of safe shelter and supportive counseling for abused women and their children.”*

- 35 beds
- Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- Serves Strathcona county and surrounding area
- Short term accommodation and support services, childcare program, food, clothing, and personal care items, outreach, child care and youth support, crisis line, public education
- Provided service to over 800 women in 2011

**Odyssey House, Grande Prairie**

*“To have women, children and their families free from violence”*

- 40 beds
- 98% of clients from Northern Alberta
- Average stay: 15 days up to 50 days
- 322 women admitted, 383 children, 118 male children under the age of 18 in 2011
- 38% had a “substantial” financial problem at admission, 32% somewhat of a concern, needs assistance
- 13 funders, 23 agencies collaborate



### ***Questionnaire Data Collection***

Questionnaire collection started after the initial December visits, with some sites starting mid-late December, 2010 and others not until January 2011. Data collection ended in either June or early July 2011, depending on the start month, for a total of approximately six months in each women's shelter. 296 completed questionnaires were received, although not all respondents were eligible to complete all questions in Part B, and a few omitted some questions in Part A for unknown reasons.

Monthly participation sheets requested intake workers to record those who refused participation (82) and those who were deemed not suitable to ask to participate (151). Of those who did not participate, an intake worker offered the following typical reasons:

Some could care less, some are too tired, some are too much of a wreck and some think their partner will get into trouble if they say anything.

A few participation sheets were missing and the data were not recoverable, so these non-participation numbers may be slightly low. Those deemed not suitable reflect both clients whose mental health made asking these questions problematic, as well as those women who were in the shelter for reasons unrelated to abuse, and hence not eligible. A best estimation is that about half of all intakes during this period participated in the questionnaire.

A graduate student at the University of Calgary familiar with research methods and quantitative data entry was hired to manage the questionnaire data. Coding categories were determined by the researchers. If the graduate student was uncertain as to the appropriate coding of any response, she confirmed with a researcher before entry.

As each set of questionnaires was received (usually monthly) data was first reviewed by the researchers for unusual quantitative responses, so coding could be assigned and discussed with the graduate student. All qualitative data added to the questionnaires was recorded separately by the researchers, with themes emerging and coding assigned.

After entry of each set of quantitative responses, the graduate student posed any relevant queries to the researchers, and the results were reviewed for that specific batch. Upon completion of data entry for the last questionnaires, results were printed out and verified. Additional questions were posed to the existing data. No new entries were made, rather was data sorted into comparison categories to answer specific questions. For example, once all demographic information was entered, it was sorted for categories such as immigrant/refugee women, women with/without children, or with/without pets. It was then further sorted into increasingly smaller categories, to answer emergent questions. An example would be, how many Aboriginal women had companion animals or pets?

### ***Questionnaire Research Challenges and Limitations***

As with most survey research, the responses in this quantitative portion are limited to self-report and in this case, the reports of women who have managed to make it to a women's shelter and be admitted. Responses may have been further subject to some interpretation by the intake workers of the



participants' answers. On the other hand, respondents did for the most part have the opportunity to clarify questionnaire meanings as needed with intake workers.

The research literature, the qualitative additions to the quantitative surveys and the individual interviews all make it clear that victims do not always have the same understandings of what might be considered human or animal abuse, or may be in denial. As Ascione (1996) and McIntosh (2004) both noted, different tolerances and perceptions regarding the nature of abuse may result in an under-stating of the actual prevalence among respondents and provide false negatives. If anything, the data should be considered an under-report.

Some technical issues did arise. A review of the questionnaires revealed that for one particular month's data from one site, the last pages including questions 3.9 to 5.7 had not been asked of any client. Sometimes, questions continued to be answered after the stop point should have been reached for the individual, and not everyone who was eligible answered all questions that they should have. This being the case, the researchers have been careful to note the number of respondents for each question, ensure that data was sorted and recorded as reliably as possible and explain any incongruities as needed.

### ***Interview Data Collection***

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews with 14 women as well as three adult survivors of domestic violence situations when they were children, who met the criteria: companion animals or livestock were part of their (or their mothers') decision-making process with regards to leaving an abusive situation. Along with whatever they wished to offer of their personal story, and the general topics as indicated by the interview questions, all women were given the opportunity to offer suggestions and solutions for the problems they encountered specific to companion animals and livestock.

Actually meeting with and interviewing willing participants was as difficult in this project as has been reported by others carrying out similar research (Doherty & Hornesty, 2008). Although intake workers attempted to have us contacted immediately, and we could attend to the site within two days, some women wanted time to think about it, and we had to wait for them to act. Others agreed, and a time might even be set up, but in two days their circumstances or decision changed.

The following observation was offered by an intake worker as not atypical:

I try and get as far as I can with the questionnaire and to the interview process. But when I get to asking if they would like to do an interview, they tend to shut down.

22 women who fit the criteria originally volunteered to participate via the five women's shelters, of whom eight were actually interviewed. Seven others left before the interview could be set up, four left after the interview was set up but before the interviewer arrived (less than two days) and the other three changed their mind or did not make contact. The balance of women interviewed were: self-



nominated from posters, brochures and public service announcements in related magazines and journals (2); referred by other shelters or agencies who had heard about the research (5) or were adult children of interviewees who were referred by their parents (2).

Ten community service providers were also interviewed from participating and non-participating women's shelters, provincial Family and Child Social Services, and counseling agencies. Social workers, Executive Directors, Child/Youth Workers, Intake workers, Outreach Workers and Crisis Intervention Workers all participated.

Representatives of the Ontario and Manitoba Veterinary Medicine Associations, both Guelph and Calgary Veterinary schools, a Bylaw Officer, kennel owner, lawyer, representative of an Alberta Spay Neuter project that works with reserves, and two humane society representatives who have boarding programs affiliated with women's shelters provided ten additional sources of input.

These latter participants were not pre-selected; they naturally emerged through the interview process by referral or logical connection to the work. They were not asked pre-determined questions, as their professional background and experiences varied greatly. Rather, they were asked to recall first hand experiences with clients who were similar to the interview group, and offer suggestions or solutions based on both positive and negative experiences in their specific field.

For example, a women's shelter based interviewee spoke about a kennel where her dog was being boarded at no cost. The ED of that shelter later identified the kennel owner, phoned her and asked if she would consent to an interview and upon her agreement, the normal consent process was followed by a conversational interview consisting of topics that made sense relative to her knowledge and experience.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed into a word document, either by a professional transcriber or one of the researchers. Pseudonyms were used in all cases. A number of women stated they were happy to have their real names used, however this did not occur for safety and confidentiality reasons. Service providers are identified by position, rather than name, for the same reason. Each transcript was reviewed by the researchers, and any relevant statement was transferred to a separate document and sorted into themed groups. This was done separately for women and service providers, although many of the themes were in fact identical. This first sort was then reviewed to ensure that placement of each item was still appropriate, and sub-themes were developed as needed.

As in any such study, the findings can only represent a small sample of women and service providers. The sample was not and could not be randomly selected, and therefore cannot be generalized to the entire population of rural Alberta women living with domestic violence whose decision-making was affected by the presence of companion animals or livestock. However, similar voices and themes arose amongst the women and the service providers, and they are not unlike findings in related previous research (Doherty & Hornesty, 2008; McIntosh, 2004; Onyskiw, 2007). We are confident, therefore, that the findings have meaning and can be considered valid given the nature of the study.



### ***Interview Research Challenges***

As with any human research, and particularly research on traditionally “hidden” topics, some challenges were encountered in carrying out this study. Finding 30 victims to interview within a six month time frame proved difficult. Finding youth to interview proved even more difficult, and any future similar study would need to consider sources with more permanent residents than first stage shelters.

As a result, the youth aspect had to be dropped, and partially replaced by the retrospective reflections of three adult women who had encountered domestic violence and animal abuse in their homes as youth. Although fewer women were interviewed than initially proposed, the researchers feel that their voices provided enough data and variety of experience to be meaningful.

Finally, rural immigrant and refugee women used the services of these particular shelters so rarely that any animal or livestock data generated could not be considered reliable.



## Section 2. Quantitative Research Findings

The findings presented in this chapter are based on questionnaire responses from women who were admitted to five women's shelters serving rural Alberta over a period of six months. The total number of questionnaires that were completed was 296. Some of the women's shelters admit those in need of shelter who have no abuse in their backgrounds, and some such women may have completed the questionnaire in error. As reported by intake workers, they would be a very small minority.

Overall, these questionnaires offer comprehensive data that can be used for viewing the circumstances of women entering women's emergency shelters from a number of perspectives, depending on the level of specificity of information required. The questionnaires have been structured and administered in such a way that subsets of the total sample population are clearly defined. Respondents indicate their membership in a particular subset by responding "YES" or "NO" – there is no ambiguity regarding the number of participants in any given subset.

With respect to the focus of this specific report, the questionnaire responses provide information about women entering five rural/suburban Alberta women's shelters in relation to animal ownership, on three levels of specificity. On the level of "big picture", the questionnaires provide information about the proportion of women who come to the shelters with children, as well as the proportion of women who own companion animals and/or livestock. The subset of Aboriginal women is also examined with regard to such animal ownership. On the second level of context, the responses provide information about subsets where women, with and without accompanying children, experience threats or harm to animals while living in abusive relationships or attempting to leave. On the most specific level of information, threats or harm to animals is described in terms of the effect it has on women and children, and documents their responses to the threats and harm.

### Level 1: Overview of Respondents in Relation to Pet or Animal Ownership

The focal categories for this study were presence of animals and presence of dependent children. The questionnaire was designed to provide a picture of these major categories from various perspectives. This design also ensured that numbers within the categories could be cross-checked for accuracy. An additional category, which emerged because of their high rate of women's shelter residency, was Aboriginal women. Depending on the reference source, the Aboriginal population of Alberta is between five and seven percent, with those numbers being higher in specific parts of Northern Alberta (Alberta Health Services, 2011) whereas almost 35% of questionnaire respondents self-identified as Aboriginal.

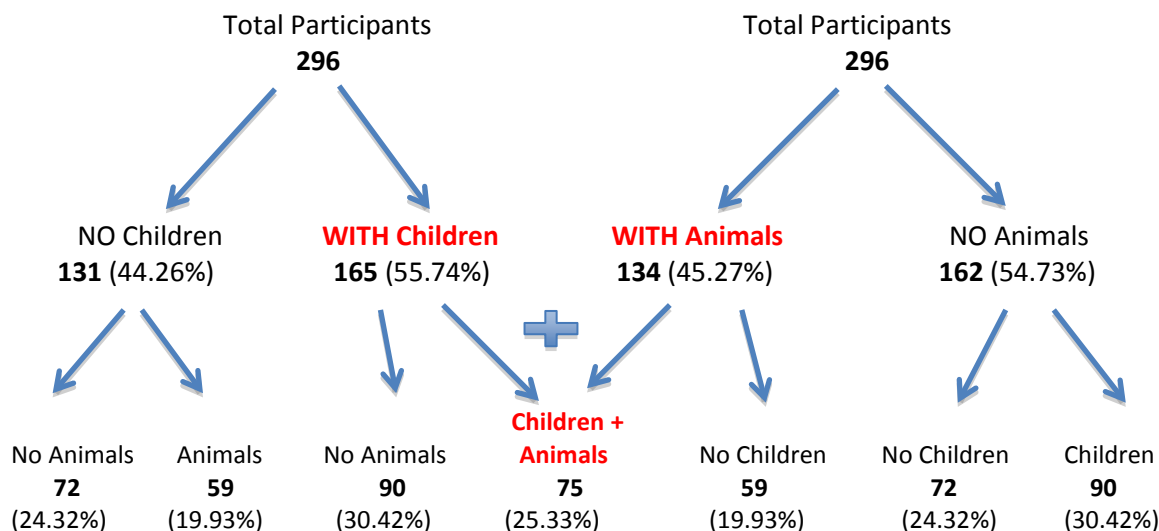
The big picture findings, given as percentages of the total number of responses, are summarized in the Figure 1 below.



**Question 1.5 Women with Children and Question 3.1 Women with Animals**

This diagram shows how the three most important subsets – animal owners, participants with accompanying children, and animal owners with children – were derived:

**Figure 1. Presence of Animals and Children in Relation to Total Number of Participants**



In summary, **45.27%** of responding women reporting having animals and **55.74%** presented with accompanying children. Women with children but no animals made up the largest sub-group (**30.42%**) followed by women with both children and animals (**25.33%**) who made up one quarter of the responding population.

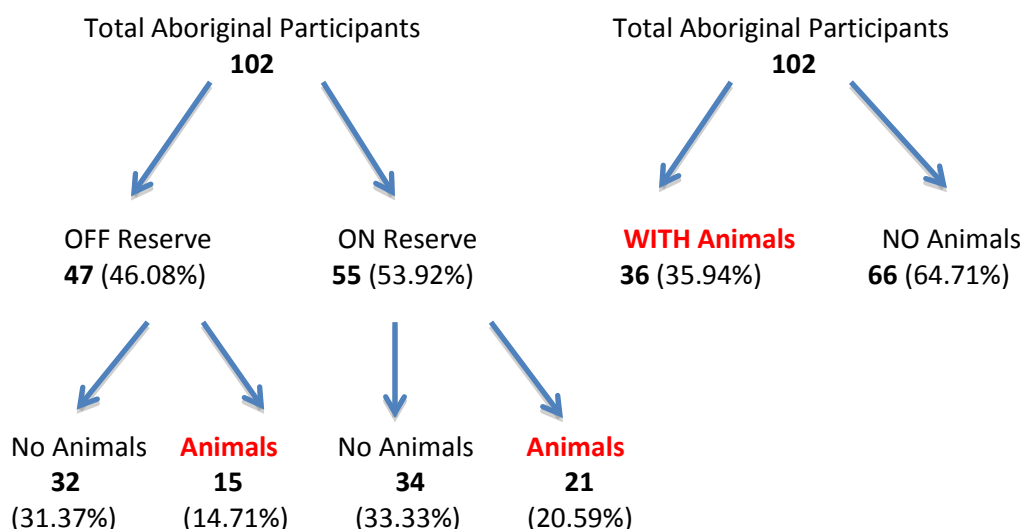
**Question 1.1 Aboriginal Women Subset and Question 3.1 Women with Animals**

The data on Aboriginal women were of interest because this group of respondents present in relatively high numbers compared to their representation in the general population of Alberta. As will be seen further on in the data, they also represent a smaller percentage of animal owners than their numerical representation in the data. The data are presented below as subsets of the total number of respondents, to get a sense of the role of Aboriginal women in the overall demographic, as well as how the specific subsets are reflected within the Aboriginal subset.





**Figure 2. Aboriginal Women Participants and Animal Ownership**



Although statistics on Canadian and Albertan animal ownership are hard to come by, most references suggest that more than half of Canadian households own a pet (Perrin; 2009). Including livestock into the numbers, for which no statistics were readily available, may increase this percentage. Aboriginal households as represented by the respondents in this survey, declare significantly lower animal ownership (**12.16%**) than the survey group as a whole (**45.27%**) or the non-aboriginal group (**33.11%**), based on total participants (296). In total, of the 134 pet owning participants, (**26.87%**) were Aboriginal and (**73.13%**) were non-aboriginal. As becomes evident in the qualitative data, on-reserve animal ownership is often defined differently than in the overall population. Most on-reserve animals are described as being loosely owned rather than tied to an individual or family. Loose ownership is generally considered to include care such as “irregular feeding of a dog that roams freely” (International Companion Animal Management Coalition, p.5).

**Question 3.2 Animal Ownership**

The 134 animal owning respondents to this questionnaire collectively reported ownership of 188 animals, with dogs (77 or 41%) and cats (72 or 38.3%) representing the vast majority. Cattle (3), horses (5) and a donkey were the only livestock listed. Everything from lizards to fish was reported as animals, with 31 such other animals listed.

Of the 134 animal-owning participants, 77 (57.46 %) reported that the animals had names, while 58 (43.28%) reported that their animals were not named. The woman was responsible for animal care in 60 (44.77%) of cases, the children in 18 (13.43%) cases. Males (17), both partners (34) or both partners and children (10) were responsible in the other 45.51% of cases. In at least some of those joint care or male primary-care households, it might be fair to postulate that that the animals would be less likely to be subject to abuse if the abuser was part of the care, but this was not determined based on the survey data. Other family members held the final 6.71% of the animal care responsibility.



The total number of responses – 148 – includes some duplications, such as when “both partners”, and “both partners and children” were listed as caregivers for different animals in the same family.

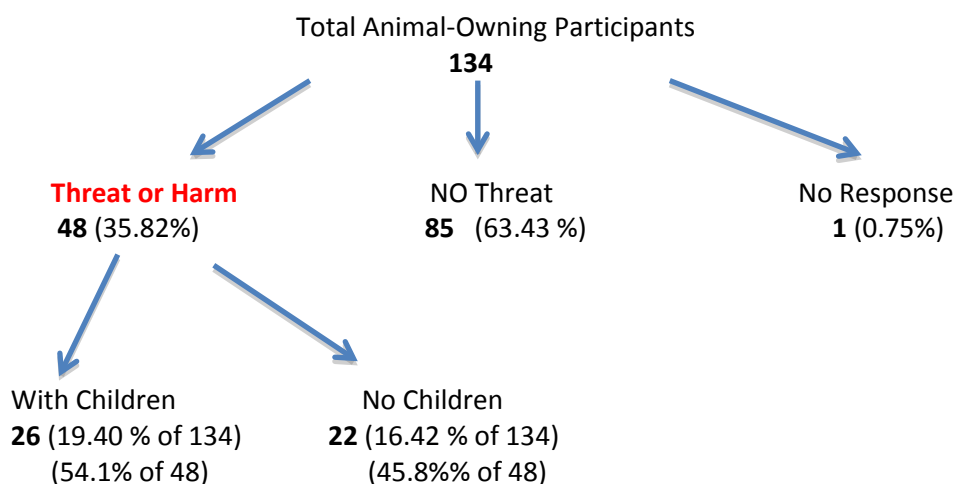
## Level 2: Analysis of Harm in Animal Related Contexts

In this second level of analysis, the responses provide information about subsets where women alone, or women with children, experienced threat or harm to animals while in abusive relationships.

### Question 3.3 Has Your Current Partner Ever Threatened to Harm or Actually Harmed the Pets or Livestock?

This question is first reported in terms of the big picture – the 134 animal owning participants and with or without children.

**Figure 3. Threat/Harm to Animals and Presence of Children in Relation to Animal-Owning Participants**



In four cases where the response was “no threat or harm”, the respondent went on to describe events that could more generally be considered abusive: refusal to provide finances for animal food, threat to take animals to a humane society, refusal to provide vet care, and throwing the animal. These are recorded as “no” responses, as that is what was indicated on the questionnaire by the participant. If they were added, yes responses would be 52 (**38.8%**) and no would be 81 (**60%**). This is but one of example of women’s lack of knowledge regarding the nature of abuse; animal and human. Among those women who had animals, 48 or **35.82%** were subject to threats or actual harm in relation to their animals. Of those who had animals that were threatened or harmed, 26 or **54.1%** also had children.



### ***Question 3.4 (Part 1) What Did Your Partner Threaten to Do?***

Of the 48 respondents who indicated the presence of threats or harm to animals, the following 28 different actions were listed by people who commented on how animals were being **threatened**.

Threats of Physical Harm: **6 (12.5%)**

Threats of get rid of **8 (16.66%)**

Threat to Kill: **10 (20.83%)**

Unspecified Threats **4 (8.3%)**

In the majority of reports, more than one threat of physical harm was mentioned. Each response was only counted once in a category, no matter how many threats were listed. For example, a not atypical threat of physical harm list (count of 1) was: “throw it out the window, leave it outside to freeze, and lock it in the basement without water.”

Threats to kill tended to be reported as more general; “I’m going to kill that little f\*\*\*\*\*.” Getting “rid of” usually referred to taking an animal to a humane society, giving it away or abandoning it.

Some respondents reported both threats and actual harm, in which case both were recorded once. An example would be: “kill them, threatened; kicked them, actually did.” In this case, killing was reported as a threat in the data, and kicking as actual physical harm, which appears in 3.4 Part 2.

### ***Question 3.5 If There Was a Threat, Do You Think Your Partner Might Have Followed Through?***

The **48** respondents to this question reported the following perceptions:

Yes **30 (62.5%)**

No **10 (20.83%)**

Unsure **8 (16.66%)**

The majority of respondents, **79.16% (38)**, believed there was at least a possibility the threats could be carried out.

### ***Question 3.4 (Part 2) What Harm Did Your Partner Actually Do?***

Some respondents provided different answers for different animals, for a total of 51 responses. Of the 48 respondents, 41 (**85.4%**) respondents indicated actual acts of harm, of which 31 acts (**64.58**) appear not to have been preceded by a threat. In some cases, this was hard to determine, and subject to the interpretation of the intake worker recording the data, and the researcher interpreting the qualitative responses that were written in.



31 of the 51 actions reported involved physical harm done to the animals. In most cases, more than one event was listed. The longest list included: “hits dogs in the face; kicked the dogs very hard, so they went flying; hit them hard on the hips; thrown outside, face smashed into the ground for digging; face rubbed in feces then smacked in the face.” In some cases, it was difficult to tell if physical harm caused death or not: “he shot my cat”. Unless death was specified, such responses were recorded as physical harm only.

Eight reports indicated that the partner “got rid of the animals.” It was impossible in six cases to tell if that meant gave them away, killed them, or removed them from the home. Two deaths could actually be confirmed. Ambiguous responses are typified by: “son’s father said the dog ran away, but the landlord overheard what happened and the dog ended up in the garbage bag dead.” One death report indicated: “Partner would kill the puppies and kittens. Threatened and followed through with breaking their necks. He sold her last batch of puppies and shot her dog before she left.”

Another eight reports indicated isolation or neglect of the animal, such as locking it outside in freezing weather, refusing to pay for food or refusing veterinary care. In four cases the respondents were not sure what happened – whether an animal was killed, died of natural causes or ran away, but it was no longer present and they strongly suspected the partner.

It must also be remembered that each of the participants is reporting from a women’s shelter, and in almost all cases, has been subjected to personal violence, along with witnessing violence towards their animals. Although the two do not always co-exist, there is certainly dual occurrence in at least these 48 instances.

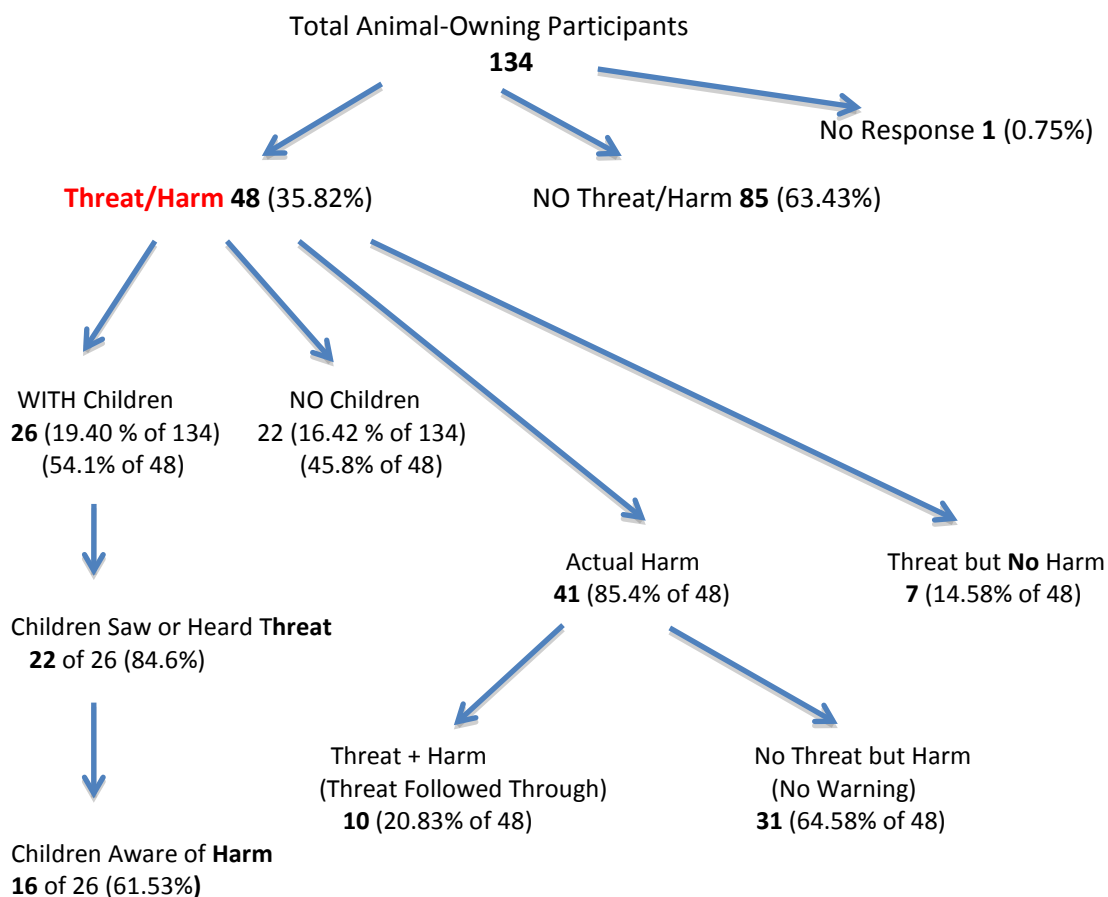
### **Level 3: Analysis of Effects of Harm or Threat of Harm to Animals**

In this most detailed level of analysis, the effects of potential or actual harm to animals are discussed in terms of impact on child witnesses and the impact on women’s decisions regarding leaving the abusive situation. Since only women for whom the sub-questions were relevant responded, each response is described in relation to the total number of women in the subset who answered the particular question.



**Questions 3.6 and 3.7 and Questions 3.3 and 3.4 Threat/Harm**

**Figure 4. Role of Threat/Harm for Animal-Owning Participants**



Of the 134 women with animals, **48 (35.82%)** had those animals threatened or harmed. **41 (85.4%)** of the 48 **observed actual harm** with or without a threat first. **31 (64.5%)** respondents reported just harm, with no preceding threat, **7 (14.5%)** reported threats but no harm, and **10 (20.8%)** reported threats followed by or in combination with harm

Of the **26** respondents with children, **22 (84.6%)** believed that the children saw or heard the threats, **16 (61.53%)** further believed that their children witnessed or were aware of the actual harm done to the animals. For **13 (50%)** of these child witnesses, it is reported by the mother that the child’s own animal was threatened or harmed. Occasionally threats were not only overheard by children, but involved them directly: “He told my then four year old if she did not clean up puppy’s mess, he would slit its throat.” Given that some of the children were babies or infants and therefore not reportable in this context, the percentage of actual children affected within this reported category is extremely high.



**Question 4.0 Has Your Partner Discussed Animal Abuse Previous to the Relationship?**

51 participants found this question to be relevant to their circumstances. Of these, 9 (17.65%) reported Yes to past animal abuse by their partner while 42 (82.35%) reported No.

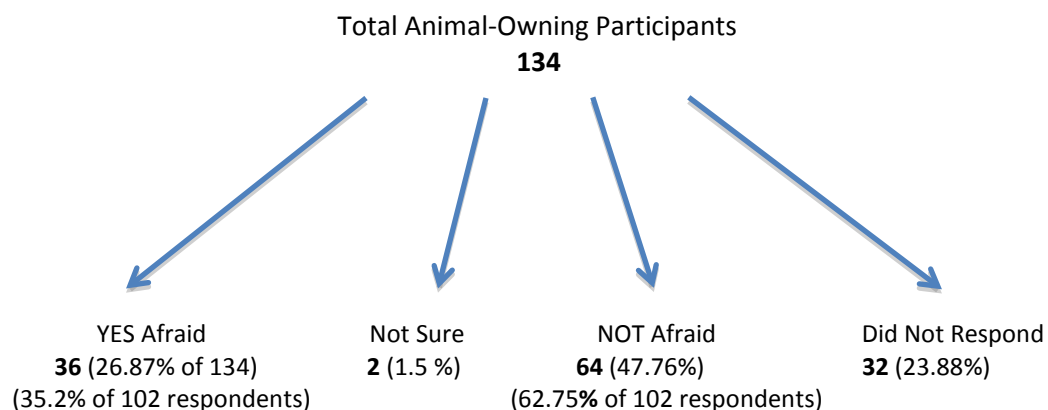
From the group of 48 where threats or harm occurred, 40 participants responded to this question, with 8 saying Yes (20%), and 32 (80%) saying No. In general, this is lower than rates reported in other studies, for reasons that are not discernible.

**Question 3.9 Have You Ever Discussed the Threat or Harm to the Animals with Your Children?**

Of those 26 respondents who had children and whose animals had been threatened or harmed, 18 had then discussed this with their children. Of the 8 who said no, 6 of the children were pre-school age, and might have been judged by the parent as too young for such discussion.

**Question 5.0 Have You Ever Been Afraid to Get Help or Tell Anybody About Your Situation Because You Were Worried about Your Pet or Livestock’s Safety or Well Being?**

**Figure 5. Afraid to Get Help: Animal-Owning Participants**



In five cases, respondents who said “no” added “because everyone already knew” or words to that effect. In 3 other instances, women responded “no” because they took the animals with them at the same time they sought help. Surveys are always subject to the interpretation of the question by respondents, but this question was clearly subject to some contextual interpretations of the meaning. This may also explain why 102 of the total of 134 animal owners responded while 32 did not respond to this question. Of those who responded, 36 (35.2%) said Yes, they were afraid.



***Question 5.2 Did You Stay in the Relationship Longer than You Would Have If There Were No Pets or Animals to Worry About? (39 respondents)***

This question should have been responded to only by those 36 individuals who responded yes to the previous question, however, 39 responses were recorded. One of the first 36 did not answer any further questions, and four people who answered No continued on with questions although they had been directed to stop. In retrospect, all respondents who responded to question 5.0 should have been asked to respond through to question 5.7.

Yes – **23 (58.97%)** of 39

No – **8 (20.51%)** of 39

Unsure – **8 (20.51%)** of 39

Of those who responded, a clear majority, **58.97%** delayed leaving, representing a mixed group of those whose animals were threatened or harmed, and those who simply had responsibility for the animals.

***Question 5.2.1 If Your Animals Had Been Harmed or Threatened, Did You Stay in the Relationship Longer than You Would Have If There Were No Pets or Animals to Worry About? (31 respondents)***

Yes **23 (74.19%)**

No **8 (25.8%)**

**31** respondents who had animals that had actually been threatened or harmed answered this question. **74.19% delayed leaving**, a significant number for that specific group.

***Question 5.3 Did You Look for a Safe Place for the Animals? (50 respondents)***

Yes – **39 (78%)** of 50

No – **11 (22%)** of 50 (one respondent actually had no animals)

Of those who responded, more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  looked for a safe home for their animals.

***Question 5.5 Did You Find a Safe Home for the Animals? (39 respondents)***

Yes – **28 (71.79%)** of 39

No – **11 (28.21%)** of 39

Not all respondents who found a safe home indicated where it was, and some respondents indicated different homes for different animals. Most prevalent as a response was placement with a relative (12) or a friend (7). Four noted surrendering to a humane society, with one commenting they were not told about a 21 day emergency boarding plan until it was too late. Four found homes for the animals with



neighbours. Creative solutions included asking people in the dog park, and placing a newspaper ad. Two people had some animals that were safe at home, because the partner liked them, while others they had to place. The variety of individual plans is exemplified by: "I found some of the puppies homes, one male and one pup went to the SPCA and I kept one. It was heartbreaking."

### ***Question 5.6 NO, I Did Not Look for a Safe Home, What Was the Reason?***

One respondent of the 10 who replied in the negative gave no answer to this part of the question and some picked more than one choice. In four cases, they knew there was nothing available, three said they could not afford anything, two had no way to transport the animals and six chose "other". No one was afraid they would be found out. No single reason for not looking was predominant.

### ***Question 5.7 When You Left Home, What Happened to the Animals? (51 respondents)***

Of the 51 people who responded to this question, some gave different answers for different animals. 20 animals stayed in their original home, 11 were somewhere safe, five came with the victim, and two were missing or dead. Of the 13 responses in the "other" category, 4 animals were at a humane society, one had been picked up by the pound, and all the others might have been assumed by the corresponding written answer to be safe, but were recorded by the respondents as other. This included having been adopted out, returned to previous owner, and similar responses.

33 of the respondents in this group were women whose pets had been threatened or harmed. Of this sub-set, five went with the woman, and seven were somewhere safe. Two were missing or dead, 11 remained in the abusive home, and eight were in the "other" category. At least 13 women of the 33, or **39.39%**, knew their animals were in unsafe conditions upon leaving. This is similar to the range found by Flynn (2009):

Depending on the study, in anywhere from 4 to 50 percent of the cases, the animal was still with the abusive partner or ex-partner. This created much anxiety and concern among the women, who were not only worried about their animals' well being, but who were vulnerable to the batterers' attempts to control them by threatening to harm their companion animals. (p.117)

Table 1 compares the present study with other recent studies on the same topic. While our statistics generally agreed with previous studies, there are some noteworthy differences. The percentage of shelter population women who had animals was lowest in our study. It is possible that the rate of animal ownership was affected by the high number of Aboriginal clients reporting, but there are no comparative figures for this sub-group in other studies. Certainly, non-aboriginal animal ownership was about 3 times higher than Aboriginal, and higher than overall numbers in the other studies.





**Table 1. Comparison with Other Studies**

<b>Question in relation to total respondents and/or relevant subsets</b>	<b>Crawford-Bohac 2012</b> Total respondents in survey: <b>296</b>	<b>Doherty-Hornosty 2008</b> Total respondents in survey: <b>273</b>	<b>McIntosh 2001</b> Total respondents in survey: <b>100</b>	<b>Ascione 2000</b> Total respondents in survey: <b>101</b>
Participants with animals	45.27% (N=134 of 296)	70% (N=191 of 273)	65% (N=65 of 100)	64.1% (N=65 of 101)
Non-Aboriginal participants with animals	73.13% (N=98 of 134) <i>or 50.52% of 194 Non-Aboriginals</i> <i>or 33.10% of 296</i>	Not reported separately	Not reported separately	Not reported separately
Aboriginal participants with animals	26.87% (N=36 of 134) <i>or 35.94% of 102 Aboriginals</i> <i>or 12.16% of 296</i>	Not reported separately	Not reported separately	Not reported separately
Participants with animals who also had children	55.97% (N=75 of 134) <i>or 25.33% of 296</i>	57% (N=109 of 191) <i>or 39.9% of 273</i>	47.7% (N=31 of 65) <i>or 31% of 100</i>	60% (N=39 of 65) <i>or 38.61% of 101</i>
Participants with children and animals where the children were aware that an animal had been threatened with abuse or harmed	84.62% (N=22 of 26) <i>or 29.33% of 75</i> <i>or 16.42% of 134</i> <i>or 7.43% of 296</i>	33.94% (N=37 of 109) <i>or 19.37% of 191</i> <i>or 13.55% of 273</i>	64.5% (N=20 of 31) <i>or 30.77% of 65</i> <i>or 20% of 100</i>	61.5% (N=24 of 39) <i>or 36.92% of 65</i> <i>or 23.76% of 101</i>
Participants with animals whose partner threatened to harm animals	35.42% (N=17 of 48) <i>or 12.69% of 134</i> <i>or 12.16% of 296</i>	45% (N=86 of 191) <i>or 31.50% of 273</i>	39.4% (N=26 of 65) <i>or 26% of 100</i>	80.8% (N=53 of 65) <i>or 52% of 101</i>
Participants with animals whose partner had actually harmed animal	85.4% (N=41 of 48) <i>or 30.59% of 134</i> <i>or 13.85% of 296</i>	41% (N=35 of 86) <i>or 18.46% of 191</i> <i>or 12.82% of 273</i>	47% (N=31 of 65) <i>or 31% of 100</i>	83.08% (N=54 of 65) <i>or 53.47% of 101</i>
Participants with animals who were more reluctant to disclose or get help	35.29% (N=36 of 102 who responded) <i>or 26.87% of 134</i> <i>or 12.16% of 296</i>	60% (N=115 of 191) <i>or 42.12% of 273</i>	Not reported	44.62% (N=29 of 65) <i>or 28.71% of 101</i>
Participants with animals who delayed decision to come to a women's shelter due to concern for their animal's safety	58.97% (N=23 of 39 who responded) <i>or 17.16% of 134</i>	27% (N=52 of 191)	25.4% (N=16 of 63)	35.38% (N=23 of 65)
N= number of respondents within a specific category or subset, <i>OR</i> number of people responding to the question, compared to the larger pet owner category or to the total number of respondents in the survey				

Participants who had both animals and children are relatively similar in all four studies. For the most part, more than half the women with animals had children, and many of those children were exposed in some way to human and animal abuse. This study had the highest number in that category, (84.62%) and it is certainly an issue to be noted for those working with such children.



The respondents in our study indicated a lower frequency of threats to animals by their partners than the other studies, but a higher percentage of actual harm done. Much of the animal abuse appears to have occurred without prior warning. Without knowing exactly how the question was worded in other surveys, it is hard to do a comparison, but the actual harm rates reported are similar to that of Ascione and double that of the other two studies.

Women in this study reported lower levels of concern with regard to disclosing or getting help than in others. There were some qualitative comments to the effect that it did not matter; either everyone already knew, or there was nowhere to get help in their location anyway. Rather, their decision to delay leaving seems to have been most affected. Of those pet owners who did enter the shelters, 35.29% of the women who responded indicated that they were reluctant to report abuse or to seek help because of fear of what would be done to their pets, but 58.97% reported that they delayed leaving because of concerns for their pets. The latter number is significantly higher than other studies.

These numbers from all four studies are consistent in indicating some general trends:

- A significant number of women who enter women's shelters have animals
- Those animals are often under threat along with the women themselves
- Children often witness the threats to the animals
- Women delay leaving and/or seeking help, as a result of concern for the animals

There is a clear linkage, in the three previous studies and this current one, between human and animal abuse, and the effects of both on women and their children.

## Qualitative Comments from Questionnaire

Although the questionnaire's purpose was to collect quantitative data from women's shelter residents, some respondents did offer comments either by writing them personally, or as recorded by the intake worker.

### ***Animal Placement***

Those who had companion animals or livestock where there was no threat to the animals, and the animals had no effect on their decision making, reported various solutions regarding placement of the animals. Typical were the following comments:

I didn't think of it because it was a "res" (reserve) cat.

Animal stayed in the family home while she came to the shelter. She feels this is safe. Dog is owned and cared for by all family members.

Gave her lots of food (cat) and asked a neighbor to tend to her.

There were significantly more written comments, as would be expected, from women where the animals did impact decision making, and may have been under threat. Similarly, there were different



references in the comments to placements than were actually reported in the questionnaire. A respondent might leave the question blank, but then report in writing elsewhere as to the outcome for the animal. Animals were variously reported in the 29 written comments to be: at a humane society (6); dead (5); cared for by a friend (4); safe at home (2); with relatives (2); sold by the partner (2); adopted out (2) and one each of: at home and not safe; missing; boarded; adopted; given away by the partner; and given away by the victim. The numbers and places are different than for question 5.7 and may perhaps refer to different animals in the same family and certainly reflect the difference between those who answered the question only, commented only, and some who did both. All tables represent a question's statistical answers, not comments.

Many of the comments were similar to those that follow in the qualitative interview section:

He took our two cats and just dropped them off somewhere without anyone knowing. The horse is still safe boarded out, my dad has the dog and grandma has the bird.

We gave each dog (two) away within six months and chose never to own any again.

I didn't want to take him (cat) away from his home, so he is still there.

She had to give the cat to the shelter because she was afraid he would hurt the cat.

### ***Importance of Animals***

Five women commented generally on the importance of their animals, and of those, three referred to them like they were family members. Typical comments on the importance of the animals include:

My dog came out of the bedroom when he was freaking out at me. She came and stood beside me to protect me.

The dogs are the kids and mine, and I will get them back when the time is right.

I would have been gone long ago if not for the pets.

### ***Abuse of Animals by Partner***

Most often reported was that the animals were physically hurt. All of the general forms of abuse listed in the questionnaire comments are echoed by the women in the qualitative interviews that follow in the next chapter. 45 individual unsolicited comments about the nature of the animal abuse were offered, of which a representative sample include:

He threatened to kick the animals out of the house or send to the SPCA. He actually kicked them (dog and cat) against the wall.



Threatens to throw pets out the window, kill them, shoot them, or give them away. He would pretend to pet an animal and feed it, then throw it over a fence or lock it in a shed.

If you leave it here your dog will be dead

History of shooting birds with bb guns and chopped a rabbit's head off with an axe previously.

### *Leaving*

The presence of animals in the women's life presented various complications as they attempted to leave the abusive situation. Most often identified (3 each) was housing and finding a way to safely go back and get the animals from the home after leaving without them.

Client was hurt so could not deal with kitten. When she was hurt, her first thought was the safety of her kitten.

Won't give away pet, tried to stay in places that will accept pets, like a hotel, but it was expensive.

Four women offered that they would have left earlier, if not for the pets.

As McIntosh (2004) found:

The present study confirms prior research that indicates that animal abuse and other forms of family violence often co-exist, and that this often leads to women delaying the decision to seek shelter, for themselves, their children, and their animals, from this violence. (p. 15)

### *Effects*

As might be expected, most of the statements regarding the effects specific to animal abuse centered on fear for both the human and animal victims. They ranged from worrying about leaving the house for an evening without the animal, to fear that the animal might be trained to hurt a future newborn child. That the effects are long lasting was also clear. An intake worker recorded that:

She still suffers the loss of her pet and said that she even continues to dream about her. Since she has come into the shelter, her main concern has been to get her kitten out of the house. We are currently trying to get it to safety.

As will be seen in the three chapters that follow, comments from the various qualitative interviews serve to mirror and enhance the findings from the quantitative survey.



## Summary

Of the 296 people who filled out the questionnaire, 134, or 45.27% had animals. Almost all of the animal owners had companion animals, rather than livestock. 48 reported threats or actual harm to the animals and of those, 22 had children who were aware of the threats or harm. There are a number of ways to interpret these three pieces of data, but at least one possibility is that it may be more difficult, for a variety of reasons, for women whose animals are being abused to make it as far as intake at a women's shelter. Similarly, having children and animals, may be a double issue. Certainly, it could be postulated that it is difficult for women with livestock (or livestock and children) to do so, and both topics are further explored in the qualitative interviews.

Although the low incidence of animal ownership (**12.16%**) among the Aboriginal clients at the women's shelters was not a surprise based on other statistics, it did perhaps affect the results numerically, since their rate of residency was relatively high (**34.46%**). Other similar studies do not report this information separately.

While women with children and no animals made up the largest group of residents, **25.37%** of those women who presented at the five women's shelters had both children and animals as a responsibility and concern when leaving, above and beyond their personal needs. As noted by Onyskiw (2007),

Pets may be an especially important support for women without children... The stronger the emotional attachment to the pet, the more likely the pet was harmed. Women without children more frequently reported that their pets had been harmed than women with children. (p. 14)

Of the respondents who indicated there had been threats and harm to animals, 26 (86.66%) also had children. **22 (84.6%)** believed the children saw or heard the threats, and, **16 (61.53%)** believed the children were aware of the actual harm being done to the animals. It can be reasonably assumed that victims of violence are not totally aware of all that their children see and hear for a variety of reasons, so if anything, the above statistics may be an under-report. Although the actual numbers are not large, the reported percentage of children in this situation who overheard or actually witnessed abuse of the animals is *very* high.

Of the threats reported, killing was the most prevalent (**20.83%**). Most women believed the partner to be capable of carrying out his threats (**62.5%**) and a total of (**79.16%**) thought it was possible. However, it was much more common for the abuser to act, than to just threaten the animals. Of the 48 women, 7 (14.5%) reported threats only, 10 (20.8%) reported threats followed by harm and 31 (**64.5%**) reported one or more actual acts of harm with no preceding threat. In all, 41 (**85.4%**) reported actual harm. These numbers, of course, only reflect those women who actually got to a women's shelter, and were able to gain admittance.

Of the **102** participants who responded to the question around fear of getting help, **36 (35.29 %)** said yes, they had been reluctant to seek help or report abuse. Of the 39 who responded to the question



regarding delayed leaving because of the animals, **58.9%** said yes. The most affected group was women whose animals had been threatened or harmed, where **74.19%** reported delaying leaving.

When asked where the animals were at time of leaving, 33 of the 51 respondents had animals which had been threatened or harmed. At least 13 women of the 33, or **39.39%**, knew their animals were in unsafe conditions upon leaving, with some others giving answers that were too ambiguous to determine the response.

Actual harm to animals is higher in number than other studies, while threats are somewhat lower. It is possible that each of the studies calculated these numbers in a different way. For women where actual threats and harm occurred, rate of delayed leaving is much higher than other studies. And, none of these numbers represent the difficulties for abused women who also have livestock, or livestock and children, since in this study, they rarely made it to a women's shelter.



## Section 3. Qualitative Research Findings: Interviews with Women

### Demographics: Participants

The following tables represent basic demographic data for the interview participants. Responses are not recorded in percentages as the sample size is too small.

Age at Time of Interview	Number of Participants
Under 30	0
Early 30s	2
Mid 30s	1
Early 40s	1
Mid 40s	4
Early 50s	1
Mid 50s	3
Late 50s	2
60 and over	0

Home Location at Time of Leaving	Number of Participants
Rural Northern Alberta	5
Rural Southern Alberta	2
Rural other provinces	4
Urban	2
Northern Alberta reserve	1

Family Status at Time of Leaving (multiple responses)	Number of Participants
Married	9
Common law	5
Dependent children	5
Independent children	6
No children	2
Pregnant with no children	1

Family status, specifically the presence of children, was often noted to have affected a woman's decision to leave or return. Typical would be both of the following:



I ran away I don't know how many times with my poor children, but I always came back because I couldn't leave them with him. I didn't know where to go. I didn't care where I went, I just had to look after my kids and so I would come back. They were in university when I (finally) left, and the oldest was in Japan working. *(Respondent 7)*

And I left before my baby could hear in the womb. I'm like oh goodness, this baby is hearing in two weeks, I couldn't believe it, and I'm like I can't do this to the kid. I left him at 14 weeks. *(Respondent 13)*

Living Status at Time of Interview	Number of Participants
In shelter	8
Living independently, urban	3
Living independently, on acreage	1
Living independently, on farm	1
Living independently but about to be homeless	1

Work Status at Time of Leaving	Number of Participants
Unemployed	4
Professional other	4
Health care / personal service worker	3
Farming	2
Postal worker	1

Work Status at Time of Interview	Number of Participants
Unemployed, unable to work or find work	8
Unemployed/volunteer, by choice	2
Employed professional	2
Own business, farm-related	1
Health care / personal service work	1





Financial Situation at Time of Leaving	Number of Participants
Employed and okay	4
Unemployed, no income	3
Unemployed, on welfare	2
Unemployed, receiving Disability	2
At home, no money/income (partner abandoned participant)	2
Ran farm (partner was removed by police)	1

Five women had no source of funds at all when they left, and two others were the only source of funds for the partner. The significant range of women’s financial situations is demonstrated by the following comments:

I had a good job and money saved up. I had, for a very long time, had my own bank account. *(Respondent 7)*

I am suffering unemployment based on a variety of things, and basically I am one step away from the street. My family is paying my rent, and I have EI for one more month. I have been declined welfare twice because of the equity in the home, and everything is tied up in court and there is nothing I can do to get at it. I have no car, I have no idea what I am going to do, where I am going to go, how I am going to survive, and the kids (animals) are a big part of that. *(Respondent 1)*

I left my partner with 35 dollars in my back pocket and a bag of clothes. *(Respondent 11)*

I have a full time job and to not have to lose it I had to stay here, (in the shelter). He would take my bank card, he would, payday today, he would have had it all. Everyone said, why did you give him your bank card number? Well, in that situation, you just give the number. It is much safer to just do that. *(Respondent 10)*

## Abuse in Background

Participants’ Family of Origin Abuse (multiple responses)	Number of Participants
Abused as children	8
No family abuse	6
Animals abused by family	2
Participant abused animals as a child	1



Four women noted that this early abuse affected their choices in future relationships:

My relationship with my husband, now that I have had counseling, was part of the pattern. In fact in the beginning I thought, you are always like my dad, I'm marrying my father, not realizing how destructive things were until I go back, and reflect and think holy cow, look at all those light bulbs that should have gone off. My dad abused the dog, he beat him, the family dog. *(Respondent 1)*

More generally, this kind of background was often reported to align somehow with the women's attachment to both their animals and poor choices in partners:

I just really wanted someone to care for me. He was very charming at first. I crave something to love me, and something I can love back that isn't going to hurt me. *(Respondent 7)*

Six women noted that their partners had specifically mentioned being abused as children, three others said the partners specifically would not talk about their childhood. One knew the husband's father to have abused animals in his presence:

...and he would make comments on how if he got a dog, and brought it on the farm because he didn't have any friends close, and the dog started to play with him and stuff, then his dad would come out with his gun and shoot it, and say you really will need a dog because now it doesn't work and just shoot it in front of him, and his dad would take 2x4's and hit the horses if they didn't do what he wanted. *(Respondent 7)*

Only one woman in this study knew her partner to have personally abused animals as a child, but four noted that the partner's own animals were abused or neglected by him while they were together:

He does not take the dog to the vet, or walk her and she is a border collie cross who needs exercise. He won't pay for the pet food. He just wants the dog to be there for him, so I suppose he loves the dog as much as he can love anything. He would never let me have the dog, he can't let me have anything. *(Respondent 3)*

And I totally believe that anybody who hurts an animal, they are also hurting the people. *(Respondent 4)*

Animals were reported by all farm and rural women as being part of the environment, both in their childhood and adulthood. Typical of these women would be the following:

At the time I had 3 horses. One belonged to me, and 2 belonged to all of us. They were recreational, not part of our income. One dog, my dog, and 2 cats, which were mine and the kids. They were pets, but outside cats, they all had names, but they ran free on the acreage. *(Respondent 8)*



For those women who had only companion animals, the following was typical:

I have a cat. I have 2 pitbulls. But my dogs sleep with me, they stay in the house with me, they do everything with me, they are not outside unless I am outside with them. *(Respondent 10)*

### Demographics: Animals

Along with the various animals noted below, fish, chickens, rabbits and a fire-belly toad were all mentioned as animals that had to be considered when leaving. All respondents were animal owners, or they would not have been selected to participate.

Animals at Time of Leaving (multiple responses)	Number of Participants
Dogs	8
Cats	5
Various farm animals, including cattle	3
Horses	2

Animals at Time of Interview (multiple responses)	Number of Participants
None	3
Companion animals with participant	11
Livestock with participant	3
Companion animals at animal shelter	2
Companion animals fostered	2

Animal Care Responsibility Prior to Leaving	Number of Participants
Participant responsible	9
Participant and partner mutually responsible	3
Participant’s children responsible	1
Participant and her children responsible	1



Animal Location at Time of Leaving	Number of Participants
Participant left with animals	6
Participant left animals with partner	5
Participant left animal with neighbour	1
Some animals with participant, some with partner. Mutual decision.	1
Participant remained on farm with animals, partner bought out of farm by participant	1

Animal Placement upon Leaving (some participants who had multiple animals provided multiple responses)	Number of Participants
Dead	3
With neighbour	1
With participant, at home	2
Left behind, fate unknown	5
Boarded at animal shelter for free	3
Boarded at vet at a cost, but can't pay	1
At women's shelter, which is against the rules	1
Given away by partner (against will)	1
Given away by participant	1
Sold by participant	1
Slaughtered for food by participant	1
Living in participant's car while she is in shelter	1

The comments that follow are representative of the reality of the statistics above:

The dog is probably still with him or dead. I knew he would be homeless once I left, he would have no money or anywhere to live or any way to feed the dog. It was devastating to leave (dog's name) and I knew what would happen, but it was the only safe way to get out of the house that day. I know he will take it out on him for me leaving; the dog will suffer for me and the kids. *(Respondent 14)*

I had nowhere to put them, so I just left them at the house. I stopped in the morning before I went to work, because he was not there, and stopped after work, stopped before I went to bed. *(Respondent 10)*

One is at the SPCA, one is being boarded at a vet; I can't afford to get it out yet. *(Respondent 6)*

Well I actually ended up giving two of the calves away in return for looking after two of the other ones, right? And the llama I had to give away, and the horse I sold for \$500 and she was worth a whole lot more, she was beautiful. And the chickens I slaughtered and put in the freezer. And then I went back to get the



cats and stuff because I found a home for them, and they had all been poisoned. *(Respondent 12)*

Did they (women’s shelter workers) know he is (dog) in the car? Yeah. Well I think they really looked into it and stuff. You know they want to make sure he’s taken care of and everything. And I’m like yeah, yeah, no he really likes it. They could tell he was well taken care of you know, I had the windows rolled down, I had bowls of water. *(Respondent 13)*

Access to Vet Care Prior to Leaving	Number of Participants
Not allowed by partner	4
Not allowed by partner – considered a waste of money	2
Too far away	2
Unaffordable	2
Considered unnecessary by participant	1
Care provided when needed	3

No woman reported easy access to vet care for companion animals. Working farm animals were more likely to have this support. For those who were not allowed vet care, the following is typical:

No he would not take her to the vet. He said if he had to, he would just use a bullet. I had no idea what services were there, other than the vet was an hour and a half away. *(Respondent 1)*

## Importance of Animals

Importance of Animals for Participants (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Provide unconditional love, no judgment	7
Understand and meet emotional needs	6
They are like my children, part of family	8
Relationship with farm animals is sacred	4
Only support I had	3
Give me purpose; feel needed	3
Help me keep it together/sane	3
Fill a void in my life	2
Only thing my emotions are safe with	2
Not alone when isolated from everything else	2
Bring joy	1



That animals were considered like family, and needed to be considered like family by professionals dealing with abused women and children, was made clear by many interviewees. For example, one pleaded:

I just can't express enough, these animals have to be, not only for their sake, but for the women and children's sake, or the men's sake, taken out as a family unit. Because it is so much healthier for the kids and the women. You will hold on to anything you can to keep your sanity and they are one of the things that keep your sanity. And to say if you want your freedom, you have to give up this animal that has literally saved your life a lot of times, or you have to leave it behind and take your chance, because he will probably kill it, because he is mad at you, and he knows that you love this animal, and he'll fix you. *(Respondent 7)*

Importance of Animals for Participants' Children (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Allow children to express emotions	3
Provide stability for kids when I could not	3
Provide a lifeline for children	1
Use to teach empathy and social skills to kids	1

Animals' Impact in Participants' Decision to Leave (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Treatment of animals helped me understand how serious this was	4
I promised to always take care of animal, like he took care of me	3
Would have charged him if he hurt animals, did not charge for herself	1
Animal was previously abused, could not let that happen again	1

It was clear and unequivocal from the interviews that the companion animals and livestock played a significant role in the lives of women and their families. Over 40 individual comments were offered with regard to this topic. Animals were often described as replacements for, or of as high value as other family members, and sometimes the only source of comfort, joy, and emotional support a woman had:

I didn't even want him because I knew (what might happen to the dog)...but when I was getting abused, after my beatings, or verbal beatings, my dog, he'd know and he'd cry too, he'd put his little head on my chest, lick my face, and I owe that little dog, because he kept me going. And I vowed that I would do whatever it took to take care of him. I would never abandon him, I would never



let him go hungry. He's my little hero, you know, he's what helps me keep it together. He is just like my child, he is MY dog. *(Respondent 6)*

They are part of the family, my relationship with my animals is such an exchange of giving, I have such an appreciation for my animals, for all animals. I don't think there is a hierarchy. Of course animals are lower than my children, in my family system, but they are highly valued and appreciated for what they bring. *(Respondent 8)*

Four women remarked that they withstood much abuse themselves, but it was not until their animals were also abused that they realized how serious their situation was:

The dog played a role in my understanding of what was really going on. I started to believe it was really happening to me. I was in denial until the dog thing. When he said we would have to put it down, I knew there was nothing there I could trust. I knew he was mad at me, and maybe my daughter because she was female and came from me, but the dog, the dog was part his and male. I think the dog was really responsible for getting me out of there. The dog helped me understand just how much trouble I was in. *(Respondent 3)*

Another sub-theme in this topic was the importance of the animals to the participants' children, for a variety of reasons:

I think they provided emotional stability for the kids, something to hold onto in a sea of uncertainty. You never knew what was going to happen next, but you could always go out and play with your dog and tell him things you couldn't tell anyone else. You could cry with him, when you knew mom wasn't strong enough to take any more. When I couldn't help them anymore, they would go with the dog, and they would tell the dog how it hurt. And to think that you can take that dog away from the child, and put the child in a home, and they say where is my dog, and you say I had to leave him at home with daddy, you can't do that to a kid, you just can't. You have to make sure you look after that animal, because that's their lifeline. *(Respondent 7)*

Such comments are mirrored in the research literature. Onyskiw (2007) noted:

Women who are abused, like other women in the general population, report a strong emotional attachment to their pets. Abused women may be even more emotionally attached to their pets than individuals who live violence-free lives because of the chaos and emotional trauma and the isolation they experience. Pets are an important source of support, a companion for many women. When women are isolated, they may substitute pets for human interaction in their lives. (p. 13)

Flynn noted that animals played a similarly important role in the lives of abused women:

When companion animals witnessed the woman being assaulted, they typically played either one of two roles: comforter, providing emotional support to



women after a violent episode; or protector, sometimes risking their own physical safety. (p. 118)

## Partner Abuse of Animals

Abuse Towards Participants' Animals (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Physical abuse	10
Threats only	4
Yells	3
Neglect, lack of care	3
Killed	3
None	2
Given away/sold without permission	2
Had animal put down without permission	2
Wouldn't let animal leave with participant	2
No abuse seen, but suspected	2
Partner abandoned, no money for care	1

Abuse by Partner of Own Animals	Number of Participants
Physical	2
Neglect	2

As can be seen from the chart above, animal abuse can take a number of forms, but the effects are almost always the same and become cumulative with the simultaneous human abuse:

People who have been abused like I have are canaries, always checking. We always know what's going on, to who, where, what part of the room... He used the choke chain and he literally would choke him. And I knew in my heart it was wrong, but I gave my power; he's the man, he knows these things. And then it got to the point where he would say (dog's name) and yell at him and it was the same thing he did to me, exactly the same thing. And he would do it to me when I would question, well why didn't you come home last night? And unfortunately I would keep in his face, and eventually he would slug me or throw me down and kick me. *(Respondent 4)*

In a minority of cases, only the human was a victim:

Even when he was ignorant as hell to me, he was always sweet as pie to the dogs. I don't understand that. They have never been hit or beaten or things like that. *(Respondent 10)*





35 separate comments were offered with regard to the abuse of companion animals and livestock. Some abuse was simple and direct:

If the animals wouldn't do what he wanted, he beat them. A calf that wouldn't suck, he beat it to death. *(Respondent 2)*

Other forms were much more subtle:

The dog cowered when he was near, hid under the couch when he raised his voice to anyone. *(Respondent 14)*

## Control Through Animals

Methods of Control by Partner (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Uses animals to intimidate	13
Threatens to harm	6
Threatens to kill	4
Physical abuse	4
Uses as a tool to convince partner to return	3
Killed	3
Dead animal put in bed with participant	1
Uses pet as part of legal process	1
Participant forced to pretend not to like animal for its safety	1
None	1

Control as a form of abuse was so frequently noted that it was coded and themed separately. In general, the women felt or were told directly by their partners that animals existed just to be controlled, as did they.

With abusive men, like my son in law, everything is just a dumb beast to be controlled. *(Respondent 2)*

All but one participant, whose husband loved the animals, reported that the animals were used to control her, either overtly or by implied threat:

He just set the whole marriage on using my cat to make sure I knew that he was capable of doing what he said he would do. He was very... he had a very bad temper. And he would take his collar and hang him from his leash from the closet door until his little feet couldn't touch the ground. And he would say if you touch him, I will kill him. *(Respondent 7)*



I wanted to care for the horses, but he controlled how much the horses got to eat. He would give me a rough time, and get angry at me and pick a fight and tell me I babied them and I wanted them to be fed three times a day, and he wanted them fed once a day, even in winter, and things like that. I felt I had to sneak the horses the right amount of feed. *(Respondent 8)*

He used the dog to get at me, for control, he would injure it when he was mad: threw it across the bedroom, at the book shelf, kicked him, broke his leg. *(Respondent 14)*

He threatened to put the dog down if I left. I never thought he would at first, because the dog belonged to both of us, for about three years. After I read a few books about domestic abuse, I realized this was classic and he really might do any of these things, especially the dog. *(Respondent 3)*

One woman seemed to be speaking for the majority, in describing the effect of such control:

When we no longer control the world in which we live, we can't enjoy it, not while living in a constant state of angst. *(Respondent 2)*

Onyskiw (2007) and Flynn (2009) agree

Women are forced into abusive situation or forced to remain silent about the abuse because they fear that their cherished pet will be hurt. Abusing pets are a powerful means of control and intimidation. When people care deeply about their pets, it is terrorizing to have someone hurt or threaten them. (Onyskiw, p. 14)

One could reasonably argue that male batterers maybe targeting pets precisely because their partners are strongly attached to them...Not only was a loved one, a valued member of the family being harmed, but they were powerless to do anything about it at the time, and often prevented from comforting the animal immediately following the abuse. In general, the abuse contributed to a climate of control, intimidation, and terror for the children, women and animals. (Flynn, pp. 117-8)

From the interviews with women whose pets had been harmed, a chilling picture emerged, where pets were used as objects for controlling the women. Pets did not seem to merit the status of "victim", but instead were abused in ways that were calculated to have most effect on the human victims – women and children in the abusive homes.



## Children and Animal Abuse

Effects of Animal Abuse on Participants' Children (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Emotional/interpersonal symptoms	8
Male child has abused animals and partners as an adult	4
Animals became children's emotional outlet	4
Partner had children watch animal abuse, used as control mechanism	3
Kids learned not to say anything in order to protect participant	3
Female child enters own bad relationships	3
Effect of leaving animal behind horrendous	3
Children work with animals now professionally	2
Child threatens retaliation to partner	2
Distortion of what is normal or acceptable	2
Learns bullying works	1
Child blamed participant	1

Three women discussed the violence against animals with their children at the time; four did not do so. Although most women reported trying to shield their children from both the human and animal violence, they also reported a wide variety of effects on the children from witnessing. It is likely this represents an under-reporting of what children really observed or felt, as some of it likely remains unknown to the interviewee. A variety of social/emotional symptoms were observed in the children:

You can see how all the kids were affected in the photos. You can see their withdrawal and unhappiness. There is always residue from the past for kids.  
*(Respondent 2)*

This same respondent went on to describe how hard it was for her to discuss the animal and human violence with her children:

I had so many issues of my own I couldn't help them, or discuss it with them, I could just try and protect and defend them. In any case, when or where are you going to do this privately or safely?  
*(Respondent 2)*

Mothers worried that children saw the abuse as normal behaviour. One speaks of an incident that her step-son witnessed:

When the dog got thrown down the stairs, one child was living with me and he said to me, that's just the way dad is. He was a teenager. And I said no, that is not ok, this is wrong, you don't treat animals this way, you don't treat people that way either. But he was, that is normal, that is the way dad behaves and



dad's just angry, that's ok. Or, dad's joking. He has distorted thinking with regards to what is normal and acceptable behaviour. *(Respondent 1)*

Participants whose children were now old enough to be in their own relationships, believed that these relationships were affected negatively by the past:

My own son? Well his ex-girlfriend at Christmas time told us he's been using cocaine for the last four years and we tried to get him to go to AADAC. He wasn't willing. I think he started; he went maybe in April or May once or twice but just in the last month he's had two crashes where he's phoned me and...I've got him all kinds of phone numbers, different places, I've talked to his new girlfriend who is absolutely a drug-free person, never touched, never known anybody and she also unfortunately knows nothing of depression or of the cycle of violence. I believe the cycle of abuse and the cycle of drug abuse that my son is doing are one and the same thing. The self destructiveness of his cocaine is very much like the cycle of abuse. *(Respondent 4)*

My daughter is on a farm. She is 33 with three children and still with an abusive spouse. I saw from the beginning it was going to lead to sorrow and we have an escape plan for her, but she refuses to use it at the moment. She has a five year old, a two year old and a new baby. The girls won't let him touch them; just seem to tune him out. If he doesn't like their animals' behaviour they are just shot dead. All the rest are chained. So no one comes to visit, there is a wolf-cross guarding/chained at the front, but she has to feed it. She is not strong enough to deal with the animal to walk him etc. but because she takes care of the dogs etc. one cannot charge him for animal neglect. *(Respondent 2)*



## Rural Factors

Impact of Rural Location (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Trapped, isolated there	7
Lots of gossip, embarrassing	7
Transportation an issue	6
Cut off from friends by partner	5
No family around, or cut off by partner	4
Communities do not have support services	4
Telling would make it worse	4
Abuse always a secret	4
No neighbours nearby, or not supportive	3
Increases the severity of problem	3
Financial stress part of the problem	3
Not aware of anyone else with the problem	2
Has to be neutral person (from outside community) to tell or it makes it worse	2
Money gives you status, men have the money	2
New to area, don't know anyone	1
Community not prepared when it does become public	1

The participants, whether or not they were personally from a rural background, uniformly agreed that being rural made many things about leaving harder:

Being rural is a big part of the problem. There is no place to turn and not everyone has neighbours that are kind like mine, or even has neighbours. It will make its way around town for sure, and you feel foolish and worthless and scared. It was just too hard and too embarrassing to ask for help in a small town where everybody knows your business. I was not aware of anyone else in a situation like mine, it's a big secret, just like I didn't tell anybody until I thought my animals and I might starve to death. *(Respondent 5)*

All of this, at least in rural areas is pretty hush-hush, taboo. I suspected a lot, but never had a personal conversation with anybody. The gossip goes around. I think it would increase the probability there would be a problem. In my state, it would have increased the situation and make it worse. Money was a big value there, if you had money you had status, and if you didn't you were not part of the in crowd. *(Respondent 1)*

Isolation was commonly reported as an issue, both social and physical. Women reported being cut off from friends, family, neighbours and communication in general. This is similar to the findings of other



studies of abused rural women. Often, the effect was reported to be the formation of an even stronger bond with the animals:

I wasn't allowed phone calls, I wasn't allowed to go out with my friends. He made sure I didn't have friends. You build this enormous bond with your children and your animals. I was cut off from my family too. *(Respondent 7)*

He threatened to kill my friends if I talked to them. He told me I wasn't allowed to talk to the neighbours. There were no social workers or counselors, the town was way too small, I would have had to find someone to drive me without him knowing. I would have had to go into (a larger town) which is what I eventually did when I left the first time. *(Respondent 11)*

Lack of transportation in rural areas means no access to: social services of all kinds, neighbours who might help; medical care; food and basic needs; sources of employment; and veterinarians, to mention but a few things that most urban women take for granted. Six women specifically noted having no transportation when they wished to leave. Vehicles were sold away from them, disabled, or never provided to them. Lack of transportation specifically impacted leaving with companion animals or livestock:

Transportation in rural areas is a hard one, he sold my vehicle, and it's really hard to ask people to care for three pets. I don't have cages and they might mess up their car taking them somewhere. And I had no idea where to take them anyway. I could not go to a food bank to get food without a car, and I have no idea if they even give out pet food or not, if I could get there. *(Respondent 5)*

I finally did get out, and it took me 3 hours to walk 15 miles to the shelter, because I was telling myself I am going, that's it. *(Respondent 1)*



## Farm Factors

Impact of Farm Location (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Different way of thinking about animals	6
Very close to the animals	4
Trapped there, isolated	3
Attached to the farm, don't want to leave	3
Continual financial stress	2
Animals were woman's income	2
Don't drive	1
No place to go for help	1
No confidence outside farm situation	1
Culture of denial	1
Gambling, drinking and drugs a problem	1
Women have no voice	1
Multigenerational, family watching you	1

The women in this study who had farm experience clearly described their attachment to the lifestyle and the animals, and how hard it was to leave that environment:

I had four calves at the time, I had a quarter horse and the llama and my chickens and cats and dogs and all that other stuff, so I had to get rid of everything. I cried. I cried, because I loved animals. It was so much fun too; the farm was actually supporting itself. I was selling eggs and I was selling chickens and the feed I would get from the neighbor. *(Respondent 12)*

And farm women who work with animals will use that time to connect with them. A horse trainer once wrote that our horses validate us, they give us purpose and reason, unconditional love and forgiveness. We are never ashamed in the presence of animals. I think that can be said for all farm animals. *(Respondent 2)*

Also reported was a different view of animals, one that often made it difficult to determine what was normal and what was abusive:

Yeah, farming is very different from urban. Well you know, a person in a city is going to do everything they can to make that one animal live. And if it's going to cost them ten grand they'll do it. Maybe if it's going to cost more than that they'll think twice. A person on the farm might go okay I'm going to put this animal through chemotherapy, what is all involved in that and is their quality of life there and what is it like afterwards? So yeah, it's a total different way of thinking on what is the best idea for the animal. *(Respondent 13)*



For him, with his farm upbringing, they (animals) have their place. People with farm backgrounds bring something different to the relationship with animals, they absolutely do. The purpose of an animal is completely different in my experience, for me it is a valued member of my family, for someone with a farm upbringing the animal is to provide food, or to provide income. *(Respondent 8)*

Women reported waiting longer, up to 20 or 25 years, to leave a farm, but once the decision was made:

All the women say, if I heard it once I have heard it 500 times “If I had had a place to go, I would have left.” As for me, you asked about the farm. I would have walked away from it all by the end. It was a choice of life or a life sentence. *(Respondent 2)*

## Reserve Factors

Only two participants had reserve experience related to animals. Their comments align with those of service providers that come later in this study, as well as the quantitative data. In general, women who live on the reserve were not reported to have strong attachments to specific animals, and animals did not prevent them from leaving abusive situations:

And on the reserve the animals run wild, they run in packs. It’s sad. When I was there I would try and feed the stray dogs and my sister would get mad, I would sneak out and try and feed them at the side of the house, where no one could see me. I shouldn’t say that people don’t care about dogs on the reserve, but I didn’t see anybody while I was there for five months take care of their animals. To them they were just a dog and they were allowed to poop and pee in the house. *(Respondent 6)*

For this participant, who first left an abusive situation for the reserve, her fear for her companion animal in that environment is what finally drove her to the shelter:

I didn’t trust anybody to take care of him. They would just let him out alone and he would get beat up and killed out there. Stray reserve dogs, they picked on him, because reserve dogs are not taken care of, there are puppies everywhere and wild dogs, and he being a little dog, he’s not fixed, he thinks he is a Rottie. I would have never left my dog, I wouldn’t leave my dog on the reserve, no way, I would still be there. Not for me, but for my dog. *(Respondent 6)*

Like rural and farm environments, finding help on the reserve was limited by access to resources and the close-knit nature of the community:

I needed somebody and I couldn’t talk to just anybody because it would go back to my sister, right, news travel fast. *(Respondent 6)*

I worked on the Paul Band, First Nations, and transportation to services was a big issue for those women. *(Respondent 8)*





## Women’s Lack of Knowledge

Lack of Knowledge About Abuse and Services (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Had no idea what services there were	8
Misconceptions about what abuse is	5
Thought abuse was normal	5
Women do not know the law	4
Thought no professional services existed	3
Thought I was the only one	3
No idea what would happen if I left	2
Did not know how to find help anonymously	1

Lack of knowledge of where and how to access services for themselves, or even that they needed help, affected many women’s ability to make a decision about leaving:

I did not know how to find help without the whole town knowing, and he would get angry and I would be unsafe, and who knows about the pets. I had no social worker, no counsellor until after I was in the shelter. I had no idea it was available in (my area), but it would have made a huge difference. I would have left way sooner. I had no idea in general what resources were available to me or my pets. Friends and my kids gathered the information. *(Respondent 5)*

When I first called the Safe Society I remember making that phone call and saying *I think* I am in an abusive relationship. I didn’t even know if this was abuse, I just knew it felt so weird, and creepy, and seemed to have a cycle. I think I just looked it up in the phone book, I don’t even remember, I just remember that I was very distraught by the time that I called. I didn’t even know what to say, or how to ask if I was in an abusive relationship. *(Respondent 8)*



***Lack of Knowledge: Animal Specific***

<b>Lack of Knowledge About Animal Abuse and Services (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
No information on animal services	6
No idea who to call	4
Did not know about boarding services	3
Didn't know shelters don't take animals	3
Did not know the law regarding pets	3
Depended on shelter for information re animals	2
Made wrong assumptions about animal services available	1
RCMP provided information	1
No idea if food bank had pet food	1

Women were equally uninformed with regard to services for their animals:

If I would have known that there is a safe place for my animals, I would have done this months ago. *(Respondent 6)*

The woman has to know she can ask the lawyer to protect and list the pets, the lawyer has to be willing and know they can do that, and most don't or won't, and the lawyer has to know how to ask. I would have tried a woman's shelter if I had no place else, but I didn't know then that they don't take animals. Then I guess I would have tried the SPCA or foster care for him, and now I know if I did it right I could get something from a restraining order too. *(Respondent 3)*

If I had known there was a safe place for the animals and had a way to get them there, it would have been one less stress and worry. Then I would have had more of a comfort level to leave and look after me. *(Respondent 5)*

**Leaving**

More than 50 individual remarks about the stresses, decisions and reasons for leaving were presented. The comments that follow each chart in this section offer a small but representative sampling.



Reasons for Leaving the Partner (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Fear for animal's life	13
Fear for own life	5
Fear for mental health	4
Fear for children	4
Animals died (naturally or killed), so not a concern anymore	3
Animals being attacked by other animals on reserve	1

They (the animals) are going to be maimed, or they are going to be murdered. I don't care if you don't think you should use the word murder for a situation like that, but that might be your only friend, so you will guard them and protect them just like you would do your child. *(Respondent 7)*

I believe in those marriage vows, you know for better or worse, in sickness and in health, and a promise is a promise, right? So when it gets to the point that you can't handle it anymore and you're going to go crazy yourself, time to leave. *(Respondent 12)*

I have the dog, the cat, the fish, a fire-belly toad, a lizard, and when I left him this time, I had to make the decision in my mind, my girlfriend said to me, your life is worth more than the animals, you have to make a decision, get out of there before he kills you. And I kept saying, I don't know what to do, I have nowhere to go, nowhere I can take the dog. It was very hard. I just had to turn all my emotions off. *(Respondent 11)*

My horse died for me (of natural causes) so that I could be free to leave. I truly believe that he and I were kindred spirits, and I did everything I could to save him. He passed away, and there was no way I would have left that horse in a million years. *(Respondent 8)*

Loring (2007) found the same connection:

There is a connection and love many humans share with their pets, many of whom are often considered an integral part of the family. Many people feel a love for animals and are moved by their helplessness in the face of violence. This deep love and loyalty has a universal quality that has caused some battered women to resist leaving a pet to enter a shelter... (p. xviii)



### *Barriers to Leaving*

<b>Barriers to Leaving (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Would not leave without animal	7
Lack of knowledge regarding services	5
Fear for safety of animals left behind	4
Fear the animal would suffer as revenge	4
Fear of loss of custody of children	3
Loss of access to step children	3
Fear of never seeing animals again	3
Fear of animal neglect	3
Emotional connection to farm	2
Fear he would steal the animals	2
Fear of losing home	1

Of the women interviewed, 50% specifically said they would not have left without the animal(s). 10 barriers to leaving were specifically noted, of which 6 were directly animal related.

The animals were a big part of why I didn't leave for a shelter, a really big part. I was their caretaker, it doesn't matter how much stress I was in, they depended on me and supported me and I didn't want to let them down. And I was afraid if I left the house I would lose it forever if he moved back in, even though it is mine, not his. *(Respondent 5)*

I always feared that he was going to steal them (the animals), or kill them. *(Respondent 1)*

I had to be there, I could never leave the children. And if I left them with him, he wouldn't have beaten them, but they would have had no nurturing, they would have had no encouragement, they would have had no love, they need to know someone loves them and protects them and will put their life on the line for them. *(Respondent 7)*

Oh yeah, there's no way my dog was staying, no way! Because I don't think he would have hurt him, but he would have gotten rid of him. *(Respondent 13)*

It is no easy decision. As Flynn (2009) notes:

Even if the animal is in better or more trusted care, the women (and their children) are separated from and concerned about their non-human companions. (p. 118)



### *Decision Making About Leaving*

<b>Decision Making About Leaving (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Left without animals	7
Was in no condition to make decisions	3
Went back at least once due to animals	3
Planned longer for how to leave with animals	2
Stayed longer because of fear for animals	2
Snuck back and risked harm to get animals	1
Waited until kids moved out before leaving	1
Moved back home to get access to cat's medication	1

In the end, half of the women interviewed had to leave without their animals. A variety of animal related factors influenced their decision making:

I had called 911 before, but I was too scared to leave, I don't know what is going to happen to the dogs, I don't know what is going to happen to everything, so I just kind of sucked it up and kept going on. *(Respondent 10)*

I knew I was leaving but it took me seven months to plan and escape. I tried to plan so the kids and I and the dog could all leave safely. I hid the mailbox key so he wouldn't get my cheques or bank statements, or had the mail come to my neighbours. I started taking things I thought he wouldn't notice out slowly to the neighbours, like all the older kids' baby books. I could not take the dog when my sister came to visit, he would know I was really leaving. He tried to get me to leave the kids. He was very distressed as we were leaving, *(Respondent 14)*

One time I tried to leave him and I had a friend of mine who was going to babysit her (the dog), and it was a huge ordeal, I had to get her to (another town), and the friend was going to foster her while I was getting settled, and it all ended up being too much, I ended up going back to him. *(Respondent 11)*

But I lost my dog, he died the first time I left. I don't think I would have gone back, I would have been strong enough that I could have stayed away. But I lost my dog, he was my lifeline, he was my best friend, and I just lost my courage, I lost my will. To get even with me he took away the one thing he knew gave me strength, my dog. *(Respondent 7)*

Leaving is never a simple decision. As McIntosh (2004) found:

Also broadly consistent with prior research, the present study indicates that many women and children remain in violent homes, due to fears for the safety of their pets; and many of those who seek shelter, lose their pet as a result. This



confirms that threatening or hurting a cherished pet is a powerful tool, used effectively by many perpetrators of family violence to manipulate and obtain the silence and obedience of their victims. (p. 12)

When it was not possible to leave with the animals, more than one woman came to this conclusion:

Animals, if you talk to them, will understand your need to leave, and they would die for you. We have to give them permission to help us on our journey. *(Respondent 2)*

## Role of Friends and Family

Role of Participants' Family and Friends (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Family member helped	7
Friends/family identified that this was abuse	4
Had friend for support once I told	4
Neighbour helped	3
Tried to stay with family after leaving, did not work	3
I was lucky to have support; most people in the shelter did not	2
Friends/family gathered information for me	2
Co-workers/boss helped	2
Partner turned my family against me	1
Everyone was afraid of partner, no help	1

Friends and family were often willing to help women, once they knew of the circumstances:

In the end, I showed up at my in-law's place out of some kind of basic survival instinct, and found that they understood and were welcoming and we could stay. I did it just out of some kind of intuitive need for self-preservation. I eventually went to stay with them for 6 months with the baby and the dog. He has not talked to them, or his sister, since. *(Respondent 3)*

But then just hearing my friend talk too, and just say it was going to get worse. And her mom who happened to be in one (abusive relationship) too, she said, I think she had four kids with him and pretty much raised them before she left, and she's like, it is going to get worse and this is what's going to happen next and of course it was just all tick, tick, tick. *(Respondent 13)*

She said I could come and stay with her for the summer, and the night that I got there her boyfriend started battering her. And I got in the middle of it and he threw me down two flights of stairs, and she knew I had no money and nowhere



to go, and I was waiting for my paycheck to be re-directed to (city), and thank god my brother-in-law is posted in the military nearby and he came and picked me up from my aunt's and put me up in the Sandman Inn for a night. *(Respondent 11)*

I had no idea in general what resources were available to me or my pets. Friends and my kids gathered the information. I was not thinking straight by then, I was sick, I was hungry and it was not normal. I was lucky, most of the people I have met (in shelter) have no family or friends who can help, and some have young kids to worry about too. *(Respondent 5)*

## Housing and Animals

Implications for Housing (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Finding housing with animals a problem	10
Took longer to find housing	7
Had to give up animal to get housing	5
Not yet begun search for housing	5
Had animals in housing, against rules	4

Even those women for whom housing was not a personal problem reported knowing it was a problem for others with animals. Second stage and low-income housing were universally reported to be unwilling to accommodate pets as were most shelters that these women used.

That was my biggest fear, and it created huge anxiety for me, what if I have to be out on the street and I have no place to go because of the dogs. I had actually thought I would have to live out of my car, I didn't know what I could do. *(Respondent 1)*

When I left there was a 1% vacancy rate, no one was renting to someone with a dog, and it eventually took me months to find a place. My choices were really limited because of the dog, the need to take care of the dog just made it more complicated. I could have had other ways out and places to go much faster without the dog, but I just couldn't leave it. *(Respondent 3)*

My cat will be 16 in December, and she is pretending she is not staying with me. *(Respondent 10)*

My welfare cheque would be \$600, and how the hell am I going to find a place to rent for \$600 with a dog and two cats. It is much harder to rent with animals. All the second stage housing that people go into after transition, none of them accept pets. So that option for me didn't exist. *(Respondent 11)*



There were no pets allowed in the residence, but he was little so I snuck him in and out. But one day the landlady saw him when I had him outside in the yard. She said he has to go or we will be evicted. I was going to have to bring him to the SPCA, but I found him a home. I really miss having a dog, and that one would have been perfect for me and the girls, but we would have had nowhere to live. *(Respondent 14)*

Housing is an issue also noted in the research literature. For example, Onyskiw (2007) found:

The message is so powerful that some women do not leave violent partners because they are afraid that their partner will harm or kill the pet once they leave the home. Women also stay because it is difficult to find accommodation where they can take their pets. (p. 14)

## Role of Service Providers

A wide variety of service providers were identified by women; some were helpful, others were not, generally based on the individual rather than the organization or profession itself.

### *Veterinarians*

<b>Role of Veterinarians (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
None, won't help unless I pay	4
None, does not want to know about abuse	3
None, too far away to help	2
None, did not know about the abuse	1
None, didn't ask questions, afraid to lose business	1
Knew and tried to help the animals	1

With one exception, women did not report getting much support from this group, for all of the reasons listed above.

Looking back though, Doc knew. He gave me ointments and advice on how to care for the animal's injuries. I really didn't care about me. I looked up to Doc, he was gentle and kind to the animals. He smiled at me. I wonder what would have happened if I had confided in him? The vet, hmmm, it's an awkward position because their livelihood depends on the person walking in the door. So if you (the vet) start ruffling feathers the person just moves on to the next vet. It's again one of those denial things. You don't want to think that if an animal is being hurt there's probably other stuff going on. *(Respondent 4)*





I made some phone calls, I had to, because she (the animal) was so sick when we moved into that apartment in Victoria, she was incontinent. And a vet wouldn't do that for free. And in fact he would not give me her ashes unless I paid him another \$350. So all I got was a tuft of her fur (tears). *(Respondent 11)*

**Medical**

Medical practitioners got mixed reviews in general, and none offered participants suggestions regarding the animals. However, a number of women reported lying to their physicians about the abuse, and 2 physicians did suggest that women leave.

While we were together I had a mini-stroke and was in the hospital. They asked me and asked me in the hospital about abuse, but I was too tired to take on another battle in my life. People were unaware. *(Respondent 2)*

Nobody knew what was happening to me, not even my own doctor who I have had for 12 years. Like he would wonder why I had a mark on my face, or why I would need stitches, but I would tell him I fell or whatever, because who talks about it. *(Respondent 6)*

I had a broken finger that had to be reset twice. He could have said there are places if you are interested, or just handed me a pamphlet, or something. We all went to the doctor, and we never said anything, you don't ever wash your dirty laundry in public. So, he maybe had a hint but didn't want to know, and if he did know, he didn't want to get involved. *(Respondent 7)*

My network has been my psychiatrist, my doctor, and I have seen counselors. My psychiatrist and doc know how much the animals mean to me. I call them my kids. But they had no suggestions to offer to me at all. *(Respondent 1)*

**Police/RCMP**

Role of Police/RCMP (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
RCMP told me about services	4
Partner would have killed me if I went to police	4
Police/RCMP officer was mean	4
Too far away to help in time	3
Totally dependent on officer you get	3
RCMP helped with legal aspects	2
RCMP charged partner	2
Got help from RCMP victim services	2
Police/RCMP just told me to get a restraining order	1
Should be a female officer	1
RCMP saved my life	1



For the most part, women expressed fear of contacting police or RCMP, because of the reaction of the partner if he found out, and the distance to the nearest detachment. When RCMP had a specific Domestic Violence initiative, the results were more positive.

I said unless you can guarantee me that you can get to me before he does, then don't push his buttons. I got beaten enough times to know better. I wouldn't of lived if I had done that, and who would have looked after my kids. He would have killed me. I had guns stuck to my head, and all kinds of crap. *(Respondent 7)*

One couple there were RCMP officers, and they saved my life. They said you deserve better than this and stayed with me all the way, including through the court system. Once I laid charges, the RCMP who came out didn't care, just another day to him. *(Respondent 2)*

The only way I knew (about free animal boarding) was from the RCMP. I phoned 911 and she called me back, and charged him. And then she told me too, that if he wanted the dogs he would have to go for custody of the dogs in court. I had like a weekly appointment with victim services, RCMP, she said if he gets out they will call you, because I had the restraining order put on him while he was in jail. *(Respondent 10)*



**Legal/Justice**

<b>Role of the Legal/Court System (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Only negative experiences	6
Lawyers/ judges don't have relevant knowledge about animal legislation	4
Had to find the information myself about animal legislation	3
Treated as crazy by legal system	2
System inconsistent about animals and human abuse	2
Failure to prosecute animal abuse	2
Animals considered property, had to go through court to get custody	2
Can't afford lawyer to get animal custody	2
Slow access to legal system in rural area	1
Court orders ineffective regarding animals	1

Women who had made use of the legal or justice system universally found it confusing, ineffective and unpredictable.

I knew I could get him charged and get a court order but that's a laugh, are they going to write on my tombstone, I had a court order? The dogs are property, they have no civil rights, they don't have any rights, so you can beat a dog, hang him from a fence and torture him, and no one can do anything, and it is just not right. *(Respondent 7)*

There are so many inconsistencies in the legal system. You have to have the courage to go through the process for humans or for animals. As many women are reprimanded for wasting the court's time even if they are black and blue or have strangulation marks visible. Then if they do get sent back, they are as good as dead. They need assurance that the abusers of animals and people will be held accountable, that they will succeed and be safe, and that is not happening yet. *(Respondent 2)*

Look at the Family Violence Act, Section 2, sub 2, which talks about "any other order" a judge can make, but you have to present the right case. The pets have to be described as property, not family. Livestock would be a bigger problem, especially if it was his livelihood. You have to go in there with a good plan and case that will make removal palatable to the judge, so you have to have knowledge and money, at the moment. *(Respondent 3)*



### *Family and Child Social Services/Alberta Works (Provincial Government)*

<b>Role of Government Services (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Threat, afraid to lose custody of children	5
Threat, afraid they will call SPCA and I will lose custody of animals	2
Sent me for counseling	2
Suggested I leave partner	2
Provided no support for kids regarding animal abuse	1
Child worried counsellor will tell abuser	1
Social workers in a position to notice animal abuse	1

Women were generally afraid of these service providers, due to their perceived obligation to report either child or animal abuse. Once contacted, most had positive experiences. Services for the children were viewed as less effective than services for the woman herself, and rarely took into account the animal factor.

I was afraid to tell my Alberta Works counsellor, afraid I would lose my kids again if she knew what was really going on, or call the SPCA if she knew about the dog and they would take him. *(Respondent 14)*

I was offered counseling, but no support was offered for my kids. *(Respondent 2)*

### *Therapists*

<b>Role of Therapist (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Used outreach from women's shelters	3
Therapist helped participant to leave	2
Attended counseling through hospital	2
Animals came up in counseling	2
Therapist helped with animal placement so participant could leave	1
No counseling before shelter	1
Males are inappropriate therapists	1



Therapists did not evoke the same fear in women as government affiliated counsellors, and often a group session was the first time a woman came to understand that what she was experiencing was abuse.

My therapist, LF, she doesn't work for the SPCA, she is a therapist that comes to the reserve. She was always trying to get me away from my sister and she mentioned about coming to a shelter. She told me the SPCA would take the dog. I was just broken, I was broken, and I had never been to a therapist before and I thought what can it hurt? *(Respondent 6)*

I thought this is ridiculous, this is a women's support group and they have men leading it. And I am going Whoa, I can't talk to you. I didn't even like men janitors in the building, come on. *(Respondent 7)*

When I attended groups for myself for this issue, animals came up a lot, a lot of women would say I don't know what I am going to do with my dog, he hurts my dog. *(Respondent 8)*

For many of the women, until they had actually left home, they had no access to counseling:

I had no social worker, no counsellor until after I was in the shelter. *(Respondent 5)*

**Women's Shelters**

<b>Role of Women's Shelters (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Participant stayed in shelter, received services	8
Women's shelter helped with animal care	4
Women's shelter did not ask about animals on intake	3
Women's shelter asked about animals on intake	2
Received counseling and support before leaving	2
Women's shelter knew animal was living in my car	1

Women's shelters all supplied housing, food, basic personal needs, counseling, child care and many other related services. There was significant variance on their concern with regard to animals, their understanding of the importance of the animals to the women, or most often, their ability to assist with this part of the problem.

I was in the shelter in (town) first, and they have animal care available. One of the first questions they asked when I called was if I had any pets. *(Respondent 5)*



I had gone to the shelter, I had gone to women’s outreach, and not once ever did anyone say anything (about help for the animals.) Although maybe I don’t remember, my mind was in such a fog. Maybe I never mentioned I had pets. *(Respondent 10)*

I knew I had to stay at the shelter and I didn’t really know what was going on and then I said you know, was there a spot my dog could go because of this happening and she said well we’ve got a program with SPCA. The SPCA would foster him which was really hard and is still really hard that I had to do that. Yeah, to the point that I probably if I knew it would happen, I probably wouldn’t have even left the relationship, for real. *(Respondent 13)*

The significant role that women’s shelter workers can play was noted by Onyskiw (2007):

Professional who work with abused women need to understand the role of pets in families, and the emotional stress placed upon women leaving their beloved pets at home with the abuser...Given that many people consider their pets to be family members, shelter workers need to be respectful of women’s concerns and worries over their pets that are often a strong source of emotional support. (p. 21)

***Humane Societies***

<b>Role of Humane Societies (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Afraid to use the service, might lose custody of animals	5
Aware local humane society has foster/boarding program	4
Humane society did not charge a fee	3
Communication with animal agencies is slow and difficult	3
Thankful to humane society	3
Can’t visit boarded animals	2
Wait list for fostering	2
Difficult process to become an animal foster parent	2
Partner would not allow, everyone would know	1
Afraid I would have to pay for services	1
Humane society doing good job in schools of awareness of animal abuse	1
Had to pay	1
Better than leaving animals at home	1



Humane society services ranged from providing free boarding and aligned services to only being able to help if fees were paid. The more rural the area, the more difficult it was to find and access such agencies. Both the fear of having the animal apprehended due to the trauma they had received and the lack of any real knowledge about services available through such agencies impacted women's decision making.

He (partner) said they would ask questions about why he couldn't care for them, and then everyone would know he had left and I had no resources, so he said forget it. He would look foolish and mean spirited and everyone in town would know his business, so forget it. I was afraid they would put them down. I was afraid if I called to ask they would trace my number and come and get them and put them down and charge me, or if they took them I would have to pay, and I have no money. I thought I would never see them again, for sure. *(Respondent 5)*

If this boarding program didn't exist, I'd probably still be at that place. This is like the most amazing thing ever. They have been here three weeks tomorrow, I think. No cost that I know of. If I would have not been at the shelter, then I think I would have had to pay a boarding fee. But with the domestic violence we don't have to. She said that as long as I keep in contact with her, that they are fine. I text her everyday and she sends me pictures and she sends me an update. *(Respondent 10)*

No, one time before I was going to try and find a foster home, through the SPCA, but the woman from the SPCA took so long getting back to me it never ever ended up coming to fruition. And she said I had to go on a wait list. I had assistance from the Humane Society in (city), and Animal Crusaders, and (a foundation) or something to actually put my cat down. One of those organizations sponsored the euthanasia. They may not help me this time, because they usually only help once. *(Respondent 11)*

And they (humane society workers) explained it to me that dogs after they see the owner they get more depressed and then they die just from the depression of it all. And my dog's pretty sensitive so I wouldn't put it past him and I didn't know how much longer it would be. And that was a factor too in getting the place, because one lady said well maybe if I see the dog. And then when I called to arrange to get the dog to show it, then the boarding woman didn't return my call. *(Respondent 13)*

I have offered to foster dogs for the shelters now that I know they won't take them, but they say no for a number of reasons, they do not know who I am and it would cost money to find out, and they are afraid of a variety of liability issues. It would be good for my daughter too. They are concerned about security for the receiving person too, if the abuser finds out where the animal is. It could be from a shelter far away from my home though. *(Respondent 3)*



## Giving Back Through Animals

Participants Giving Back Through Animals (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Fostering animals	3
If I had money, first thing I would do is donate to an animal organization	2
Working on legal changes	2
Donate to related causes	2
Did pet therapy with my dogs	1
Working for a related non-profit	1
Want to build a retreat on their farm	1
Volunteer for SPCA	1
Started animal-related children’s program at a women’s shelter	1

For the five women in the study who had moved on to stable living, giving back to society through animals, in part to make up for what they could not do to help their own animals at the time, was common. For some it was a current possibility, for others a future wish.

So now I am doing what I can by working for a non-profit and checking out this specific legislation, and once I am certain, I will post and blog about it on appropriate sites so people know what they can do for their animals. *(Respondent 3)*

I lost the dog that I did leave there, the second time I left, and I have been trying to make up for the past ever since then. I foster animals now to the point that people think I am weird, but I have to try to make up for not protecting them earlier. I bend over backwards with the animals to care, to try to make up to them somehow that I abandoned them and my kids too. *(Respondent 7)*

I would give my money to the SPCA before I give my money to anybody. *(Respondent 6)*

I still have some people that I see on a regular basis that don’t inoculate their barn cats and I collect bottles and cans and will give them the money and say okay, you take this one, you take this one because that’s the only way it will get done. *(Respondent 4)*

## Summary

Overall, there was no question that the presence of animals impacted the decision-making as well as the future plans of these particular women, as they attempted to leave abusive situations. In a few cases concern for the animals prompted the leaving, in most others, they complicated it. No one was happy to





leave an animal behind, or found it easy to take one with. Children did not want to be parted from their animals, but their life was being negatively affected by staying. No one agency or service provider had all the answers, and many lacked the knowledge or resources to help with the animal issue.

The participants made it very clear that particularly for rural women with livestock, solutions and assistance were not easy, if not impossible, to find. They believed that many rural women simply did not, or could not, leave. The effects of domestic violence are life-long, and were made significantly worse for these women by the extra concerns for their companion animals and livestock. As one woman summarized:

Now, eight and a half years later, I stand up against any violence or abuse aimed at any person or animal. I am not the only person who has become mentally injured by watching animal abuse and gone on to allow myself to be abused. Trauma tends to beget trauma, says Jon G. Allen, author of *Traumatic Relationships and Serious Mental Disorders*. Trauma becomes “normalized” in the victim’s life. The person becomes “unable to recognize dangerous situations or people or high risk environments. The individual doesn’t get the chance to learn safe attachment behaviors”. I am a poster person for this research. I watched my animal friends victimized. I was simultaneously abused and subsequently abused throughout my life. *(Respondent 4)*



## Section 4. Qualitative Research Findings: Interviews with Witnesses

### Introduction

No youth emerged as interview candidates, as had been originally intended. In general, as can be determined by the quantitative information, children of the appropriate age group were rarely resident in the five shelters. From the interview group, none had children of the appropriate age. One did refer her now-adult daughter, one reported her childhood experiences separately from those as a married woman, and one adult witness volunteered after hearing about the project. In total, only three such viewpoints are offered, and all retrospectively. Put together with the women participants and service providers' comments on children, some perspective on the effects on youth of witnessing animal abuse can be postulated. None of this is as reliable as hearing from children personally, at the time, and future studies might consider how this could be accomplished.

### Demographics

Interviewees were all female. One is early 30's and single, having recently left an unhealthy relationship. She is self-employed. One is mid 40's, remarried, and has a career directly related to the livestock industry. The final interviewee is late 50's, divorced, and volunteers. Two live in urban centres, one on a farm. All have had therapy or counseling in the past, and for two of three it remains ongoing as needed.

Two of the interviewees grew up on farms, and the third has a rural background with animals present. Two were aware that their father had been exposed to animal abuse in childhood:

He grew up on a farm where I think pets are somewhat disposable, and he certainly grew up with the mindset that they are disposable. If the barn cats had kittens, my grandfather would grab them all, put them in a gunny sack and throw them in the lake. Whatever was inconvenient, it was gotten rid of. I remember the farm horses, which I think is incredibly ignorant, if they didn't do what my grandfather wanted them to do he would take a 2x4 and bash them with it. *(Respondent 15)*

All three reported that the families presented as normal and healthy to others:

It was; all of this was sort of strange to me because nobody did talk to anybody about any of the family violence, the fighting and stuff. We presented the picture of everybody was doing well and fine. *(Respondent 16)*

I guess, I felt like we were a screwed up family, but years later when I was talking to a very close friend of mine, when we were adults, she said I thought your family was really normal, how did you ever get that impression. I always felt like we were so different. Sometimes I was afraid to bring friends home it



depended on his mood. I don't think anybody ever saw how we were living.  
*(Respondent 15)*

Similar to the earlier participants, these three noted the isolation and transportation issues associated with the rural lifestyle:

My mother at the time did not drive and at first it was mostly just in the farm environment. We still have farm women who can't drive, perpetrators seek them out. *(Respondent 17)*

My mom had a car and a job, when my dad didn't take something out of the engine so she couldn't start her car – which he would do if she threatened to leave. He would just open the hood, take something off, and then she couldn't start her car. She was socially isolated as well. I think she had one friend who was kind of like a neighbour that eventually she kind of confided in. *(Respondent 15)*

An interesting reflection from one was that the abuse often came from the hired hands, which the participant believed was a common occurrence on larger farms:

We attracted the wrong kind of hired help as well. They would regularly kill our pets with no consequences and no recourse for us. I found my pet puppy with a pitchfork through its head. *(Respondent 17)*

## Role of Animals

All three interviewees had pets and two had livestock during childhood. They reported a strong attachment to the animals and in two cases their attachment had to be kept hidden to keep the animals from coming to harm. Cats, dogs, horses, cattle, pigs, and chickens were all reported to have lived with the interviewees. Currently, all interviewees have pets and one makes her living through livestock. All three participants remarked that they would not tolerate animal abuse as an adult.

<b>Roles of Animals (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Pets provided validation	2
Was afraid get attached to animals	2
Pleaded for pets' safety	2
Provided comfort, normalcy	2
Animals validated me	1
Knew they would get hurt	1

We had pets, and a strong attachment to animals, along with the farm cats and others that were work animals. We could exist through them, they validated me.



Dogs, horses, even cattle. I always had a great interest in cattle. At the time we had 400 dairy head which was considered huge. *(Respondent 17)*

Yes, they were all named because they were my pets as well as the dogs were allowed into the house, but only into the back porch or the kitchen. Cats were generally barn cats except for one cat that I had called Sandy. And all the cows, being dairy cows, had names. Most of the pigs didn't, but we did have one that we called Happy because she had a straight tail and she then wagged it like a dog, she had blue eyes; she was a pretty interesting pig. The chickens never had names. My pony was King. They were my pets and I would plead for them but it didn't; you know, it didn't matter. We were very careful not to get attached to an animal, as they would often disappear or turn up dead. *(Respondent 16)*

I don't seem to really remember how the animals got there, as kids we wanted a dog, which in retrospect I wonder why we wanted a dog, because we knew that they were probably going to be abused. Maybe they provided some comfort, some normalcy, so we wanted them. Pets are safe, they don't reject, they don't abuse, they are always loving, they always want you, who you are. Yes, I have two cats. I love them like kids. They are very important to me and I wouldn't want to leave them, they are comforting to me. I would never tolerate them being abused. I would probably tolerate me being abused before I would tolerate them being abused. *(Respondent 15)*

## Treatment of Animals

Treatment of Animals (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Animals considered disposable, death normal	3
Kids abused the animals	2
Kids did not know what was unacceptable behaviour around animals	2
Animals abuse normal for farm	2
Pets not spayed, neutered or vaccinated	2
Animals were rarely allowed in house	2
Hired help killed animals without permission	1
No vet care for pets	1
Animals just disappear	1

What was acceptable rurally was not the same as in urban environments, but in many cases it was not seen as abusive, just part of life:

What was considered normal then on a farm would be considered abusive now, to animals. Forcing an animal to do what you wanted was acceptable. We did not understand that the work needed to be built on trust. Cows were hurt, hit,



slapped, kicked for example, so they would enter an unfamiliar place with walls, different smells, sounds etc. to be milked or for slaughter. Not conducive to the natural behaviour of an animal. As it grew into a massive operation with a huge financial investment things were still not right, in terms of financial pressures, still no understanding of animal behaviour and how it affects production. A lot of my friends didn't really have pets, and I didn't see a lot of interaction with other people and their pets, I felt that it (the abuse) was wrong, but I really didn't know any different. *(Respondent 17)*

And the cats, well of course they were never fixed, none of the animals were ever spayed or neutered so at one point we had 19 cats and so they also got the feline distemper and they were just coughing and sneezing and I would be cleaning their eyes trying to help them and they would just die and die and die and it broke my heart. Lucky ended up getting distemper and it was his fault. *(Respondent 16)*

As kids we wouldn't know why, you know, the cat just disappeared, and sometimes in the country animals do just disappear. *(Respondent 15)*

## Animal Abuse Witnessed

Animal Abuse Witnessed (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Beat up/hurt the livestock	3
Killed animal that child was attached to	2
Hurt animal if child showed attachment to it	2
Shot animals when sick or uncooperative	1
Killed child's pet	1
Hurt child's pet	1
Animals not cared for properly	1
Chained dog with heavy chain	1
Threatened to kill family pets	1

These children witnessed ongoing animal abuse, both to their personal pets and to other animals. Their descriptors take many pages, but the following quotes help give the essence:

So the animal abuse that went on I think was basically because my brother who was 5 years older than me, so that made him around 12 or 13 at the start of us starting to live on the farm, he had an awful lot of responsibility of doing the milking chores. And looking back now I realize that was probably way too much responsibility for somebody of his age. He was responsible for most of the animal abuse. My brother absolutely would beat up the cows. They were scared and yeah, they knew they were trapped. It was not a pleasant look on their faces. As soon as he knew I was attached in any way, shape or form to a dog, a



cat or whatever, they would become his prime target. I had to keep things secret. And whenever something did happen I couldn't cry, because then he would know. I had my best friends (animals) killed, one while I watched. *(Respondent 16)*

We were disciplined with physical violence and that was considered normal, hit with a vacuum cleaner or shovel. Discipline was harsh for everyone, animal and human. I found my pet puppy with a pitchfork through its head. *(Respondent 17)*

There was one dog that we had Ralph, where I think I was maybe closest to it, he was a small breed, he was about 14, when he finally died. He was deaf, he was partially blind, and my dad came up the driveway, purposely or unpurposely, I somewhat suspect purposely. He ran over the dog because it didn't get out of the way. And then he phoned me, I was living in the city in university at the time, and he said come out, bury your dog, I ran over it. And I am like f\*\*\* how cold and heartless is that, because I was devastated, I really loved that dog. And, just to hear it like that was so harsh, just come dump off the body. I remember that if my mom liked an animal, then my dad would take a dislike to the animal. So, towards the end of when I was living there, she purposely avoided some animals. *(Respondent 15)*

## Emotional Effect

Emotional Effect (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Sad, joyless	3
Confused, don't know what to do	3
Feel lack of control of world	3
Fearful	3
Nervous /anxious	3
Knew it was not right	2
Devastated about death of pet	2
Worried it will happen to you if it happens to animal	1
Abuse burned into your mind	1
Detached	1
Low self esteem	1

A variety of negative emotional effects were reported by the participants.

I felt very sad, and your gut feeling feels that it is not right. There was a general atmosphere of fear. Anytime an animal responds in a negative way it does not seem right to a child. Put the behaviour being dealt to the animal and yourself together, and this creates fear in the child that it will happen to them, they ask what will happen to me? We were afraid of my father because of the way he



treated the animals, which was driven by financial stress, not willful intention to hurt. All the way around, we were very nervous children. *(Respondent 17)*

And they would just die and die and die and it broke my heart. I never cried, I never... maybe one of these days I will, or maybe right now. Because there wasn't anything I could do to stop any of this stuff with the cows, the dogs *(starts to cry)*. *(Respondent 16)*

There are certain childhood memories that are burned into your mind because I was devastated, I really loved that dog. *(Respondent 15)*

Only one participant was aware of her mother trying to leave, but she did not leave finally until the children were no longer at home. The second mother, also abused, is still on the farm and denies there was a problem. The third participant was abused by a sibling rather than a parent, with whom she has no contact, although she has confronted him.

But my mom had a nervous breakdown when she left, so I don't know if she even had the fortitude to even think about taking the dog, but she also, if she was to say she wanted to take the dog, my dad would say no, you are not going to take the dog and be mean to it then because he thought she liked it. I don't think it belonged to her, it belonged to the family. Would she have probably liked to have taken it, probably. *(Respondent 15)*

This parent made numerous attempts to leave, many of which the children were aware and part of:

I remember talking about leaving, and you kind of fantasize about the life, how it would be nice, but I never really thought it would ever take hold, because I knew my dad would never allow that. He said you can leave, but you are not taking the kids. And she would never leave without us. And this one in particular, she loaded us into her car, she decided that she was going to leave, I'm sure that a beating or something had precipitated her to jump in the car with us. She was driving down the road, my dad got in his car, he drove in front of us far enough ahead he found a somewhat substantial rock, picked it up, threw it into the windshield of the car so it just smashed the whole windshield. She stopped, he took my brother and sister and then proceeded to tell me to stay with my mom and convince her not to go to the police. Tremendous burden, I think I was 10 or 12, so she is hysterical, and I am trying to tell her it's ok, everything is going to be ok, he really didn't mean it, come back, it's ok, to appease him. If I am not successful then it's my fault she's in trouble, I guess as a child you want to settle things over, and to go home, it's the path of least resistance, so I think that was my motivation. I don't remember being worried about my own safety as a distinct feeling, but I just remember being motivated to make sure she came home because otherwise I would be in trouble. *(Respondent 15)*



On the effect of animal and human abuse on children, Onyskiw (2007) remarks:

Abusing family pets is also an effective method to coerce and control children, since pets are also an integral part of children’s lives...Cruelty to family pets may be used to coerce, control or intimidate children, to obtain their silence about the abuse or to ensure their cooperation. (p. 15)

A residual effect of watching parental attempts to leave was noted by the same child witness, who did not trust that help would be available from humane societies when needed. She commented:

It would be helpful if the animal shelters had numbers where you could actually get hold of people. And that is what I find a big beef about so many places, well leave a number. Well, maybe someone doesn’t want to leave a number, because someone could call back, and that is not ever going to work. If you are a person with an animal in crisis you need to be able to push zero and talk to someone immediately, and say look, I have a situation I can’t really leave my number, can you talk to me about this. (Respondent 15)

### Coping Mechanisms as Child

Emotional Effect (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Keep quiet, don’t tell	3
Don’t cry or show you care, makes it worse	2
Hang out with and help the animals	2
Pretended not to like animals so they would not be hurt	2
Hide, to get away from stress	1
Ask for nothing so no disappointment	1
Tried telling a parent, did not help	1

A variety of coping mechanisms were used by the three children. The one they held in common was not telling anyone outside the family. All three women stated that the repercussions for talking to anyone about their situation would have been too high, up to an including death, for humans or animals. They all believed no one outside the family knew, and two reported that generally, there were no supports available for children on matters of abuse.

You don’t discuss it with friends, with teachers, absolutely not. I knew instinctively that you didn’t. (Respondent 16)

There was nothing out there for me in the way of support. Whatever you do there will be repercussions, and you don’t know what they will be. There was no





one you could talk to about it, so you always hid it. She and we had no support systems. *(Respondent 17)*

So you just learned to keep your mouth shut, you just are there, you do whatever you are told and you don't ask for anything. You are always grateful when you get stuff, but don't ever ask for anything. The fear factor was so high I don't think it would have mattered what services there were, personally. I don't think I would have approached anybody, I was that fearful. There would be major repercussions at home. My father would be, he was very violent towards my mother, and we got emotionally abused, the children, so the next step would be physical violence. So to me, if he was angry enough, and the secret was out, I would think you would be beaten. I am sure my mother was afraid for her life. I am not sure she was afraid for ours, I think my dad had a special hatred for my mother, whereas he was more kind to the children. *(Respondent 15)*

Control of children and ensuring secrecy were also found by Montminy-Dana (2007):

The harming or killing of pets is used as a mechanism to ensure that children will submit to certain behaviors or made to keep secrets. (p. 92)

Two participants also remarked that their mothers pretended not to like animals, to keep them from harm at the hands of partners. Two out of the three had no regular contact with veterinarians or medical practitioners, even if they wished to tell them. One received assistance from the vet for her animals, but no conversation about abuse at any time.

We never got anybody inoculated for any ordinary diseases. The vet was called if we got mastitis because of course we had milk cows. You can't have a milk cow with mastitis. And there was the Oxford breeder man because all the pregnancies were artificial insemination. I know my pony died with rabies and I know there are horse inoculations for rabies but again, I don't know if there was then. *(Respondent 16)*

I think primarily the cost. I think if vets perhaps were free he would be more inclined to take them. My father is very cheap. *(Respondent 15)*

All three respondents reported trying to help the animals in some way, when they could.

The only thing I could do was to try and soothe the animal after the attack. I regularly would give whichever animal that had been picked on extra feed. I would clean their pen, give them fresh bedding, change their water or whatever I could think of to try and help them feel better. I would always sing to them. Most of them were songs I made up, telling them how much I loved them and how I knew they were hurt and frightened. I would stroke the animals that would allow it and if there were cuts or bruises I would clean them and ice them. This was always done in secrecy because I knew my brother would stop



me from helping the animals. Because like I say, I eventually just stopped telling my mom because nothing ever happened. *(Respondent 16)*

## Residual/Current Effects of Witnessing Abuse: Personal

Residual/Current Effects (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Have problems with relationships in general	3
Leaves leftover scars	3
Had counseling, therapy	3
Low self esteem	3
Bad relationship choices	3
Talking about it makes me anxious	2
Can't have a good relationship with parent	2
Still anxious	2
Depressed/hopeless at times	2
Angry	2
Need approval	2
Have problems with friendships	2
Trust is removed	2
Married an abuser	2
Thought being abused was normal	2
Took many years to see self as capable and independent	1
Suicidal at times, to have peace	1

All three women reported ongoing effects of having witnessed/received human abuse:

I am surprising myself by talking to you, several people have asked me to write a book but I have always said I won't go back to those times and places. Even talking about it makes me anxious. I got very uptight, I felt like I can't breathe. I had no close female friends, I was too anxious. You stay quiet until it explodes. Any negative thing that happens to a child with a human or an animal relationship is a leftover scar in the end...I am just learning how to enjoy relationships now. *(Respondent 17)*

I finally realized it, oh, I am capable, I can make decisions, I'm not stupid. Yeah, my whole life I totally believed I was incapable and stupid and only available for abuse. I never wanted to kill myself because I hated myself; I wanted to kill myself to have peace. Because I liked myself and I didn't think it was fair. *(Respondent 16)*

I was feeling very hopeless, I felt like my life was out of my control, I felt like my behaviour was to satisfy other people and not myself, and I was feeling very



angry with myself and I just was miserable. I was very, very unhappy.  
*(Respondent 15)*

## Effects of Witnessing Abuse as Adult: Animals

Residual/Current Effects (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Have animals and/or livestock	3
Help animals, stand up for their rights	2
Attuned to suffering of animals	2
Did not understand that training an animal is not abusing	1
Allowed spouse to abuse an animal, did not know better	1
Tried but could not work in vet services	1
Did not stay with a partner who abused animals	1

All three participants reported negative effects to witnessing animal abuse.

I can nurse animals to this day, but I have a hard time if I have to do something to fix the problem. It just; even talking about it I’m getting dizzy. I unfortunately didn’t allow my now-husband to teach our German Shepherd to behave and she ended up being a problem dog because I couldn’t; I couldn’t allow him to teach her things so she got to be a barker, barker, barker. And she was just very protective of me and it wasn’t good for other people and also she wouldn’t let people leave the house. *(Respondent 16)*

One participant reported the same difficulty finding housing for herself and a cat as did the women interviewed in the previous section.

I don’t have children and I was living with a guy, and I decided to move out, and my primary objective when finding a place to live was I had to be able to bring my cat. I only had one at the time, and I wasn’t going to leave her with anyone, and I wasn’t going to get rid of her. As far as I am concerned, I got her as a kitten, and she will stay with me until she dies. It was harder, definitely, definitely. I would say 65% of places or 70% don’t allow pets. Some will allow cats but a dog would be extremely hard. I know my sister experienced that (leaving an abusive relationship) because she had a dog, she had a black lab, and so that is a large dog, and people for sure don’t want that. *(Respondent 15)*



All three participants spoke of their relationships with their parents at present:

We can talk business; he is very wise and successful. But I cannot overcome the old feelings. If I can't forgive, I will have to leave that to a higher power. It eroded any potential for us to have a loving relationship. *(Respondent 17)*

And I would tell mom. I don't think I told dad all that much and I don't know what mom did with the information. She knew for about the last 10 years of her life that my brother had sexually molested me with three of his friends. And she said "well that happened so long ago, can't you just get over it?" *(Respondent 16)*

I am trying to have a healthier relationship with my dad, I am trying to set boundaries with him and stuff. Him running over my dog, I will never forgive him for that. Do I harbor resentment, a little bit. Do I obsess with it and let it interfere with my relationship with him? I try not to, because if I was to focus in on all the negative stuff, I couldn't have a relationship with him. And they say it is healthier, and I feel it is healthier for me to try to forgive not forget, and try to have a somewhat normal relationship. *(Respondent 15)*

The two whose mothers were abused commented on the effects of both animal and personal abuse on their parent:

It caused fear, detachment, and low self esteem at minimum for my mother. *(Respondent 17)*

I think she relies on animals at this point for her emotional support and needs. I think she has an overabundance of pets personally, I think she has 2 dogs, 4 cats, but I understand where that comes from. *(Respondent 15)*

## Summary

For these three women, witnessing animal and human abuse as children has had significant impact on their lives, as would be expected. Their views are retrospective, and mediated by counseling, but some themes do mirror those of the earlier chapters. All three now have animals and/or livestock that they are attached to, and believe they have incurred long-term personal repercussions from witnessing human and animal violence. Two of three had to pretend not to like their animals to protect them, and all three in one way or another recognized that leaving an abusive situation was harder with animals. The basic dilemma was understood much as it was by the women in the previous chapter: protecting self (and children) versus saving the animals:

For example, if I was in an abusive relationship now, it would be very important to me to have a place I could go where I could take my cats. Because if you know that they are going to die, like if you had sixteen horses and you know they are going to die, I would probably stay too. I would feel terrible if those horses died. *(Respondent 15)*



All reported that the past never quite left them, and never stopped impacting the future, in both positive and negative ways:

I guess as far as the animal abuse connection and family violence connection, I need to go back to that because while my story has all these weird pathways and things, it's all related right back to what I saw as a kid. *(Respondent 16)*



## Section 5. Qualitative Research Findings: Interviews with Service Providers

### Types of Participants

#### *10 Women's Shelter-related Service Providers*

- Manager, Southern Alberta
- Social Worker, Central Alberta
- Program Manager, Southern Alberta
- Child Support Workers North, Central and Southern Alberta (3)
- Executive Directors, (2) Northern Alberta
- Crisis Intervention Worker, Northern Alberta
- Outreach Worker, Northern Alberta

#### *10 Other Topic-related Service Providers*

- Humane society boarding program managers, Central Alberta (2)
- Boarding Kennel Owner, Northern Alberta
- Bylaw Officer, Southern Alberta
- Spay Neuter Project, various locations
- SafePet Ontario (OVMA)
- Safe Pet Manitoba (MVMA)
- Vet and PHD student, Guelph University (Veterinary School)
- Instructor, University of Calgary (Veterinary School)
- Lawyer, public legal education

### Demographics

Demographic information regarding women's shelter populations served by the interviewees is for the most part presented in the relevant quantitative sections, similar to it, or was not specifically recorded. Staff from all women's shelters reported the refugee and immigrant populations to be minimal, for a variety of reasons some of which are geographically specific. For example, in a northern town:

We now have a fairly large Filipino population, but I don't think we have ever had one in the shelter. They are on work permits, they are not in relationships, they don't have pets. They are single, working and sending money back home.  
*(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

Aboriginal populations were reported to be very high in women's shelters, about 50% across the province, varying somewhat between those women who were reserve or non-reserve based. This was believed by participants to mirror the higher than average reported incidences of Aboriginal domestic



violence in general, and reflected the fact that this population often had few options other than arriving at a shelter. Also matching the questionnaire data, intake workers noted that:

We hardly ever have women from reserves bringing animals. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

Six different women's shelter staff noted that very few women arrive with older children:

Most are very young, toddler age, occasionally an older one. If they do have older ones, they usually place them with family or friends. Usually the older ones don't want to come to the shelter. They are embarrassed, or they don't want their friends to know they are in shelter, so they will usually find other arrangements for them. *(Women's Shelter Child Support Worker 2)*

Most of the concerns reported by clients were about pets, rather than livestock, especially for the women who actually end up coming to the women's shelter. Horses, chickens and cows were reported to be the subject of inquiry phone calls where the woman did not then follow up. For example, a worker related a conversation she had with a woman who owned 16 horses. One belonged to her young son, the others were her livelihood. Her husband threatened to kill them all if she left. Although counseled to leave for her safety and that of the child, there was no solution for the horses. At the time of the interview the intake worker had not heard back from the woman.

Families were reported to usually stay for the allocated 21 days, if in fact they stayed more than a few days before leaving, which was also common. Families in the north were reported statistically to stay in the women's shelter for longer periods of time than those in central and southern Alberta.

Referral sources differed from place to place, but self-referral and word of mouth were rated first at all women's shelters. RCMP, Family and Child Social Services, a variety of agencies, hospitals, and Greyhound drivers (where service existed) were all mentioned as consistent referral sources.

We get referrals from a variety of different agencies, from the hospitals, victim services, RCMP, child welfare, parenting support. There is a layover with the Greyhound and quite often the Greyhound will tell them about our number and let them use the phone to call here. We are a small town and word gets out fast, in most cases. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

Five different comments were offered about transportation as a barrier to reaching the women's shelter. Recently announced cuts to many of the traditional Greyhound routes was of great potential concern. Having to reveal the situation to others in order to get transportation was a problem mentioned three times. Transportation for animals, that often did not have appropriate cages, was also noted to be an issue.

One of the barriers for some of the on-reserve women, the only way to get transportation to the shelter is to talk to someone in the band office, who might be related to their partner. *(Women's Shelter Crisis Intervention Worker)*



## Importance of Animals to Clients

Importance of Animals to Clients (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Animals are just like their kids	5
Won't leave without animals	3
Animals offer unconditional love	3
Took risk to go back for animals	2
Animals more important than personal risk	2
Returned home to be with animal	2
Animals help clients feel safe, courageous	1
Animals are their only friend	1

Reports from service providers were similar to those of the clients themselves: animals were like the woman's family, women did not want to leave without them, and they would put themselves at risk by either staying or going back to get their animals:

She took a huge risk to go back to some place where all the evidence suggested she wasn't wanted. He didn't want her back, so she was putting herself at increased risk of violence by doing that. But she didn't think he would take proper care of the animals and that was more important. These women get very attached to their pets because the animal provides that unconditional acceptance. They don't very often get that from people. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

One case that always has stuck with me was a woman whose son was abusing her, he was 17 and addicted. We took in her puppy who had a broken leg from the son. She called us on her cell, said she had lied, she had been off her depression meds and made the whole thing up, nothing had happened to her dog, and asked to take him back, as she was leaving the shelter. She picked it up and went back to living with the son. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

Pets in general; they are their baby. *(Kennel Owner)*

## Partner Abuse of Animals

Most service providers offered anecdotal examples of the cases involving animals that had most impacted them. From these was extracted the actual harm reported to have been inflicted on the animal. Six stories reflected physical harm, two the intentional killing of a pet, and one leaving animals unattended for an unsafe period of time. Other interviewees commented more globally about the number of women filling out the questionnaire or calling in who told what they described as "horrific" stories. Two brief examples follow:





A local resident phoned me to remove a dog from her residence, it was being abused. She reported her husband would kick, yell at animal, and was often intoxicated at the time. She wanted to give it up for adoption to save it from the present conditions it was under. *(Peace Officer)*

She got up one morning, opened her living room curtains, and her cat was hanging from a tree. She said it sent me a very clear message, I wasn't going anywhere, the message was clear, I was next. At that point she decided it was safer to stay there. Eventually she did end up leaving because she came to the shelter, but it took her years before she actually left. *(Women's Shelter Crisis Intervention Worker)*

### Control of Clients Through Animals

Control of Clients Through Animals (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Partner would harm animal if client not compliant	3
Partner used animals to get client to return	3
Pitbulls used by partner to create fear/control	2
Client would not testify, afraid partner would kill animals	2
Partner won't release animal to force client to stay	1
Partner left with the client's kids and dog	1

Control of victims through animals was a common theme reported by service providers, as it was from the clients themselves. Two (different) incidents of pitbulls being under the control of men and therefore being used to control women were related by this group of interviewees.

We had a lady who came from (northern town) with 2 little dogs. One came in healed, but had been thrown from a balcony by the partner, and had brain damage. She (the client) had been locked in her room and never allowed out of the house, so the dogs had no vet care. She was controlled by him through the dogs, if she didn't do exactly what he said, he would injure them. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

She was unwilling to testify or provide a statement to animal abuse so he could be charged, too afraid. *(Bylaw Officer)*

One of my outreach clients, her partner uses the pet to control her. She was out one night, he had the children for his visit, and he decided he was tired of having the kids and wanted her to come home, didn't want her to have fun, and called her and told her the dog, which was her baby, was whining and complaining and



he kicked the crap out of it and it was lying on the floor bleeding. Come home now. So of course she did, dropped everything and ran home, and the dog was perfectly fine. *(Women's Shelter Outreach Worker)*

## Children and Animals

Those whose job it is to interact specifically with children reported generally that those children were very attached to their animals, missed them and would plead with their mothers to return home, if the animals were elsewhere.

They sometimes put pressure on their mom to go back, because they don't want to leave the pet. They may put pressure on for other reasons, like their friends, or not wanting to change schools. It is one more thing that the children use to get mom to go back. *(Women's Shelter Crisis Intervention Worker)*

They worried about the animals' safety (3), whether they were being cared for (2) or refused to leave without them (2).

They report being worried because they have no idea what will happen to the animal or who will take care of it now that they are gone. Some think it might get hurt, but not by someone specific that they name, in most cases. One boy had been very involved with the livestock and running the farm, and was very worried about would happen to them. If we leave, who is going to take care of the animals? *(Women's Shelter Child Support Worker 2)*

The boys were saying if we leave the cats, dad will kill them, we aren't going, we can't go without our cats. So they had to find a place for the cats quickly, before this man came home again. *(Kennel Owner)*

In the therapeutic setting, most children and youth were reluctant to talk about animal abuse they had witnessed. Therapists intuited that they had been instructed to keep the secret:

Honestly, not many kids open up about the abuse they have seen to the animals, they more so talk about why they miss them. They talk about how much they miss them, and what they did with them but I don't think I have ever come across a kid who has talked about actual abuse to a pet. I would think they have been told not to say anything, because in other situations, they say my parents told me I can't say anything, so I am sure it would be the same. *(Women's Shelter Child Support Worker 1)*

Child and youth counselors reported using the following techniques to deal with these important issues:

- Don't ask directly with younger children
- Do ask directly grade 6 and up
- Use therapeutic drawing



- Use stuffed or toy animals to start the conversation
- Use picture books and literature
- Use related movies, cartoons

Therapeutic interventions are often reported to be revealing:

They often name the stuffed animals, toys, or animals I read about in books with their own animal's name, which gives me a chance to ask questions. For the kids that do come from the farm, I always ask what kind of animals did you have, and usually they talk about a pet that they missed, rather than the farm animals, because they are so young. *(Women's Shelter Child Support Worker 2)*

I more do therapeutic drawings and stuff like that to see what I can get out of them from that. If they drew their family with their dog, say, I would ask what they did with their dog. And what kind of fun things did you do, where is your dog now, and I just keep going. Most of them draw their families, and their dog will be in the picture. *(Women's Shelter Child Support Worker 1)*

One child care worker noted that perhaps a first stage shelter was not the best place to address these issues with children:

When the kids get here, they have so much on their plate, as do their parents, and they find it overwhelming, so it is hard to tell which things of all of it are bothering the kids the most. It would be a better question to ask at second stage housing, somewhere like that. Most stay about 21 days, if they stay more than a few and then leave. *(Women's Shelter Child Support Worker 2)*

Five anecdotal incidents were passed on where participants were aware that children who had been abused or witnessed were themselves abusing animals. For example:

She said that she witnessed domestic abuse growing up, and by the time she was 12 violence had been so normal to her that one day her cat had kittens, and she put the kittens in kind of a pot hole in her yard and ran the lawn mower over them. At the time she was so numb to violence that she never thought of it as being cruel. But she was in the shelter for abuse by her partner as well. *(Women's Shelter Crisis Intervention Worker)*

The kids were being abusive to the dogs too, dragging a puppy around with baling twine as a collar. *(Bylaw Officer)*

Certainly, therapists viewed children's abuse of animals as a warning sign of other issues:

When a child seriously abuses an animal, not like a 2 year old squeezing too hard or pulling a tail, where there is intentional harm, that is often a signal that something is really wrong in the child's life and unfortunately the animal takes the brunt of it. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*



## Rural Factors

Not unlike the clients, service providers noted the secretive and gossipy nature of rural areas, the isolation, and the lack of access to services for the victims or their animals as impacting the ability to leave.

My experience was that the calls were very rare from rural families. The isolation is a problem as they can't simply pop over to a neighbor to talk, or to get support, most don't want family to know, and they often are not aware of sheltering services due to the relative isolation. When I spoke with this population, there was almost always an underlying fear of losing everything if they leave the relationship. The woman most often does have responsibilities outside of the house type of work and the amount of time, and effort they put into the running and maintenance of the farm/property (I think) makes it harder to leave. I think sometimes their thinking goes along the lines of "I have invested my life in the relationship and farm/property and I will not walk away from what I am entitled to." When this is coupled with a lack of awareness firstly of the fact that what they are experiencing may be abuse, and the fact of isolation—many have little to no life or support outside the family – choices become very limited. *(Written Communication, Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

## Impact of Farm Environment for Clients

Impact of Farm Environment for Clients (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Client won't leave because of animals	5
Client only left after justice system intervened	2
Client had no place for animals to go	2
Farm animals (e.g. barn cats and dogs) are not pet, less emotional attachment	2
Clients wait to leave until their kids are independent	2
Client went daily from shelter to care for livestock	1

Service providers universally reported that the group that found it hardest to leave their animals and come to the women's shelter was the farm women. They might call intake, but rarely did they leave and appear at the shelter. Some waited until their children were gone and they had other resources, a phenomenon that was also reported by the farm women interviewed.

I got a call from a woman who had 12 chickens. I remember thinking oh my god, they are just chickens. I grew up on a farm, to me chickens are meat. But for her, she would not come in, she would not leave her chickens behind. We phoned everywhere looking for some sort of safe place for these animals and



found nothing, and she did decide to stay. Another lady had all kinds of livestock, cows and horses and so on, and it was the same thing, there was just no place for the animals to go, and at that point she chose not to leave. It is definitely an issue. *(Women’s Shelter Outreach Worker)*

As the police investigated, they found that there had been long term and ongoing physical and emotional abuse of both the boy and the mother, and released the boy and arrested the dad. However, police made them leave the farm, which neither of them wanted to do, and they stated they had stayed through the abuse because of the livestock, and only left because the gun incident brought it to attention. They moved back to a nearby rural town, but were not allowed to return to the farm. *(Women’s Shelter Child Support Worker 2)*

With some of these older farm women, they leave when they don’t have any more responsibility for animals, 40 years later they are leaving. The ones that do come from farms also gain monetarily from them, so they are more likely to be looked after because the man’s livelihood likely depends on it. Pets, on the other hand, would be a different story. *(Women’s Shelter Executive Director)*

### Impact of Reserve Environment for Clients

Impact of Reserve Environment for Clients (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Clients do not have personal pets and livestock	3
Clients don’t bring animals to shelters	3
Clients show less emotional attachment to all animals	2
Clients ask neighbours and friends to care for “loosely owned” animals	2
Reserve animals do not live inside, free roaming	2
Reserve dogs run in packs, client fears animals	1
Animal will be fine without client	1
Little vet care available or sought	1
Clients don’t own dogs so they avoid being charged for dog’s actions	1
Transportation to services an issue	1

As with the women participants who had knowledge of reserve life, service providers who had this knowledge did not see animals as a pivotal issue for clients who came from the reserve.

I don’t think the presence of animals makes a difference to decision making on First Nations’ reserves. If women need to leave, they may ask neighbours or relatives to look after the dogs, which may or may not happen. They are loosely



owned and sporadically fed; they forage for themselves, often in groups. It does not seem that women hesitate to leave because of the animals. Often the residents are afraid of animal control/RCMP/security enquiring about their dog so they will not claim an animal as theirs because they may be afraid that the dog has bit someone or become a nuisance (on reserve). *(Spay Neuter Project)*

There is the assumption that if you were feeding a dog on reserve before you came to shelter that someone else is going to feed that dog. Same with cats, they are under decks, and under houses. They do that for survival, they don't get fed regularly, they don't live inside, they are pretty much wild. I don't live on a reserve, but I grew up living with people on reserves and grew up in some of their homes. I have personally observed all of this. *(Women's Shelter Crisis Intervention Worker)*

## Lack of Knowledge

Service providers see potential clients as lacking knowledge about services for themselves and their animals. Four reasons were presented as possible causes: lack of appropriate advertising by service providers, fear by the clients of what will happen if they ask about services, isolation, and a shortage of actual services so they stop looking.

I do the outreach and the public ed, and I continually run into people who say I didn't know there was a shelter in town and we opened in '91. There are still lots of people who don't know we exist. And I know most people have no idea that we will take women who have pets. *(Women's Shelter Outreach Worker)*

There is a general shortage of organizations that will take in animals, many women do struggle with what to do, where to take them. We refer them elsewhere when we get calls. *(Spay Neuter Project)*

Some think their partner will get into trouble if they ask anything. *(Women's Shelter Child Support Worker 1)*



## Impact of Animals on Clients' Decision Making

Impact of Animals on Clients' Decision Making (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Stayed because of danger to pets	4
No choice but to leave animals	4
Have to choose between safety of family and safety of pets	3
Left because of danger to pets	3
Left animals with relative	2
Animals are an ongoing worry for clients	2
Stay because no other animal caregiver	2
Stay because shelters won't take animals	2
Won't leave without animals	2
Won't leave because children won't leave without animals	2
Stays in personal danger to save pets from harm	1
Did not know what happened to animal left behind	1
Animal safety highest concern after leaving	1
Worried friends can't keep animals forever	1

In general, service providers believed some client decision making was impacted by fear and anxiety about their animals; fear of leaving them, and fear of taking them with.

Although we serve both urban and rural Southern Alberta, too many times we have heard the stories of women not wanting to leave for fear of their animal's safety (livestock and household pets). *(Women's Shelter Child Support Worker 1)*

Many did not know if the animal was being cared for. Some were being cared for by the abuser, others a relative. To have someone say they don't know, I think that is an indication that they really sacrificed the animal to leave an impossible situation. But there is ongoing worry if the abuser is caring for it, particularly if the abuser has abused the animal, but sometimes they feel like they just don't have any choice. I think the ones who really feel that they have to care for these animals, they just don't leave, or they don't go to shelters. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

Unfortunately, most of the women who come feel they have no choice but to leave the animal with the abuser. Or sometimes they have a cousin or brother they can leave the animal with. Mostly they have to make a choice, between themselves and the pet. *(Women's Shelter Crisis Intervention Worker)*



Friends will only do it for so long, then they need to give the animals back, that is often when women then go back. *(Women’s Shelter Child Support Worker 1)*

Barriers to leaving unrelated to animals that were identified included: lack of services; lack of policing in the community; isolation; transportation; and lack of communication (cell phone are hidden or have restricted plans, or they have no funds to buy and run one).

## Housing Implications for Clients

Housing Implications for Clients (multiple responses possible)	Number of Participants
Shelters will not take pets	5
Less housing available for pet owners	3
Low cost/second stage housing will not take pets	3
Can’t afford housing that allows pets	2
Faster to get out of shelter with no pets	2
Have to pay extra damage deposit	1
Have to put pet up for adoption or abandon it to get housing	1

Professionals were in agreement with the women interviewed; having animals made it harder to find a place to go to either immediately or after time in a shelter, and the time in the shelter might become longer because of the pet.

One of the problems is that there is very little rental housing available that will accommodate pets, so that even if they bring their pet to the shelter, they often can’t take it where they go next. So I think a lot of women realize before they even come that they will not find housing with a pet. *(Women’s Shelter Executive Director)*

It is faster to get out of the shelter if you are not looking for housing with a pet, or they can’t afford a pet, then they put them up for adoption or abandon. In a few cases the animal is returned again to us, found abandoned in the new apartment. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

One issue that sometimes arises is smuggling pets into housing where pets are not allowed. All the subsidized housing in our area has a no-dogs and no-cats rule. However, some of the women want a dog or cat so much that they will smuggle one in. It would be nice if there were more landlords willing to accept pets. *(Written Communication, Women’s Shelter Executive Director)*





## Staff and Animals

When asked by the interviewer about what services existed for women with companion animals or livestock, unless the women's shelter was specifically aligned with a service, very few respondents had an answer. In one women's shelter where 3 different types of employees were interviewed, they all had different answers, some of which were contradictory. As one noted:

We would have to talk to the SPCA and find out what they are willing to offer, since we don't even have consensus on that among the 3 of us. *(Women's Shelter Outreach Worker)*

Women's shelters also varied as to whether they had policies with regard to staff taking animals home for clients. Those who had encountered a problem were most likely to have a policy. As one ED noted:

We have no policy about staff taking animals home. We should have guidelines for liability purposes, and should be asking for a consent and release of liability. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

Lack of staff knowledge impacts clients and their animals if staff does not complete the appropriate referrals to agencies that will take animals, either from lack of awareness or lack of time. Staff does not always see this as a priority, given the many other urgent issues the clients present with. This means the humane service has to refuse, or chase down the worker, as none will take animals without a referral:

The shelter sometimes just sends the woman and the pet without the referral; they don't seem to take the animal issue that seriously. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

## Legal and Related Issues

Deciding whether or not calling the RCMP will actually provide safety for a woman is seen as problematic for some service workers. Distance and time for RCMP to respond was identified an issue, and RCMP are perceived as unable to attend unless there is immediate danger to human life. Women were reported by interviewees to not always be pleased that the call has been made on their behalf. They are afraid they: will be charged themselves for child or animal abuse; will have their children taken away; will be forced to leave their home; or that the RCMP will find other illegal activities at the same time, and they will be blamed by their partner or charged.

They will not go out there just to transport somebody, I can tell you that. They will only go out if there is an immediate disturbance, and even then, it might take them two hours to get there. She said there is no way they can save me, if he comes to my door, I am dead before the police arrive. *(Women's Shelter Outreach Worker)*

Usually we ask the woman if she wants us to send the RCMP in, unless we can hear him assaulting her or something, then we would just call the RCMP. Usually



they tell us she will be a lot safer if we don't. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

Peace Officers and Bylaw Officers may have jurisdiction in some instances where initial complaints have to do with animals and there is no other person with legislative authority. Such officers can come on the property and remove or seize the animal through provincial legislations or local bylaws. They usually work in cooperation with the nearest RCMP and humane societies. Their actual policies (such as kill or no kill) and facilities (paddocks or not) vary from place to place.

Like RCMP, they are likely to come in contact with situations of domestic abuse. A bylaw officer who was called in on a "lack of care for animals" complaint where domestic violence had been attended to previously by RCMP, noted that the abuser additionally:

blamed her (his partner) for his arrest at trial, because if the SPCA or the Peace Officer hadn't been there, they would not have found the narcotics that led to his arrest. *(Bylaw Officer)*

Legal issues around the animals were reported by various kinds of providers as being complicated. Determining legal ownership of animals and retrieving them was seen as especially problematic:

The husband demanded the dog back, and he was told no, it was not his or registered to him. If it was not in her name, I would have seized it, but she then would have to testify of the abuse and the courts would decide the animal's fate. If there are no witnesses, it becomes hearsay evidence and may be quashed. Judges in our town tend to rule in the peace officer's favor, but lots of others just automatically give the dog back to the man. *(Bylaw Officer)*

We take the word of the crisis intervention worker as to whose animal it is. Whose ever name is on the vet records or license. If there is either, he or she is considered the owner of the animal, who is considered property. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

If a woman fled without the animal, who is going to go and get it? It has to be timely. A vet can't go in without police. Bylaws have to be observed. If he paid for the animal from a breeder but she provides all the care, who owns it? *(Manitoba Safe Pet Program)*

We tried to get some kind of charges laid here, and we went to child welfare here and in Saskatchewan, and we were mostly interested in getting the children back because this was a nightmare for this woman. But because the guy had been with the woman for over two years, he was considered legally in loco parentis having the same rights as a parent. They refused to lay kidnapping charges. He may have taken the dog because the kids wanted it, but he took the kids and the dog. I was astounded. If he had just taken the dog, there would also have been nothing we could do. That was appalling. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*



Legal issues in Alberta were also noted by the Animal Legal Defense Fund (2011) in their report ranking provinces in this area. They noted that Alberta was a Tier 3 province, and that Quebec, Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Alberta were the best provinces and territories to be an abuser of animals, based on a variety of legal criteria.

## Accommodations for Animals

### *Housing Animals at a Women's Shelter*

One women's shelter had a dog and cat run available to clients, short term. The Executive Director explained:

There have been a number of situations over the years where pets have been a major issue. So we don't want people not to leave abuse because of pets, we want to get them here and accommodate them while they are here. We have never had more than two animals at once. We could probably do without it (the run), but I am glad we have it. I don't have any desire to get rid of it, it can really ease the transition while we are trying to get an animal placed in a kennel, if they are full, or we need to get immunization. It gives the women more options. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

This solution is not without its problems, and the women's shelter has an arrangement with a local kennel to ensure the animal stays at the women's shelter are in fact short term. For example:

My experience is that even if we do tell them about the run, if they are a little dog that usually snuggles with them in bed, that they will feel bad about leaving their dog outside to be a dog, because usually they live inside. *(Women's Shelter Crisis Intervention Worker)*

We had one woman who we allowed to have her dog in the shelter, she told us the dog was ill, and she had no place to put the dog overnight. She was going to keep it in her room and take it out, it was trained. It ended up being all over the top floor and in the crib, and peeing, and she did not keep her word. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

All the rest of the women's shelters clearly did not allow animals inside or outside the residence. Nevertheless, three reported having animals show up with clients, three reported knowing animals were living in client vehicles, and two admitted to occasionally bending the rules. It was reported that most women who made it to the women's shelter stayed, even if the animal could not, but no actual statistics were available.

There have been a few families who have brought pets to the shelter, and we can't keep them here. Sometimes we do take the pets up to the floor just for a little bit, until we find a place that can take them, the shelter or whatever. In some cases they leave when we say no, but most stay, because most of them



have children, and most women know that staying here is the best for them and their children. (*Women's Shelter Child Support Worker 1*)

Problems noted with having animals resident in or around the women's shelter include: risk of spreading disease; animals arriving without ownership papers; animals with no previous vet care or inoculations; client and staff allergies; damage to the shelter; neighbour complaints if outside; security if partner finds them; lack of winter coats on inside animals who are put out; sneaking animals inside; and a host of legal and liability issues. An example follows:

They really don't have a place for them in the shelter. If dogs are kept outside, first of all they'll disturb, because the shelter is in a residential area and the dog barking all night is not going to make anyone happy, and people can go by and see, and if the dog looks like their dog, they are going to want to get in that shelter. You can't put inside animals outside, especially in winter time, because those dogs don't have a coat, they can't stay outside, even in a heated doghouse, that's not enough. (*Kennel Owner*)

### ***Arrangements with a Kennel/Foster Care***

Two organizations reported having an arrangement where animals were referred to a kennel, with no cost to the client. In both cases, kennel owners never met the animal owners, for security reasons. In one case costs were picked up by the kennel owner and shelter in combination, in the other by a humane society as part of a wrap-around service. Issues reported included: animals being abandoned; trying to find out about previous vet care and inoculations and having to quarantine; not all animals being suitable for kennel living; a variety of costs; and insurance and liability (which is dependent on the breed of animal). Those shelters who did not have such an arrangement reported having no nearby kennel, no willing kennel, or no funds to take on this work.

There was one dog actually abandoned by the client at the kennel. The kennel owner fed this dog for several months, and then I think found some sort of placement for her. And that is why we have this arrangement with the kennel, because then there is no cost to the client. And if she can't afford dog food, then the shelter pays for the dog food. (*Women's Shelter Executive Director*)

The first time I took an animal I had someone from the band calling, asking if I could take 2 cats, did I board cats and could I take two. He asked if he could bring them in an hour. Do they have their shots, he didn't know. Don't know how old they are, don't know anything. There were two kids and the mother was taking these two kids finally out of this abusive relationship but the boys were saying if we leave the cats, dad will kill them, we aren't going, we can't go without our cats... Kennel insurance is difficult, for example if you take Rotties or pitbulls, they won't insure you. So every year, my insurance broker has to really look around it takes a while to find someone who will insure me. It is really hard if you have a pet that is older and never been boarded out, always been with family or friends or neighbours, or someone, never been in a kennel. I don't



usually meet the actual owners, someone from the shelter will bring the dogs .It is safer for everyone that way. *(Kennel Owner)*

Three agencies had access to boarding through other organizations, usually through a fostering arrangement. This too was reported to have its complications: finding appropriate and willing foster parents; transportation of animals; various costs; and security.

You have to deal with the privacy issue even for the foster families, who may turn out to know the victims, or how do you know they don't live next door to the abuser? *(Manitoba Safe Pet Program)*

### ***Humane Society Programs***

<b>Use of Humane Society by Clients (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Women's shelter workers unsure what humane provides	4
Fees prohibits client use	3
Client fear of humane society	3
No way to transport animal	2
Kennels have larger runs than humane society	1
Other placements are less traumatic for animals	1
Won't take older animals	1
Has a wait list to surrender animals	1
Not legally able to retrieve the animal	1

There was no consistent response regarding the use of the humane societies for placement of client animals. Some shelters have no humane society within a reasonable distance. Some had never asked such an organization for help and those who asked, received various kinds of responses. Women's shelter workers also reported that some clients refused to ask for humane society help for fear of repercussions to themselves (charges) the animals (disease or trauma) or even their partner (charges). It was noted by some women's shelter workers that humane societies had the same limited space and funds in rural areas as they did.

For the general public there's a \$50-\$75 surrender, it depends on the adoptability of the animal. If we make it higher, no one would use the service. We won't take owner surrenders that are over 5 years old, they don't adjust, get depressed, and die. We operate off a waiting list. If you come in and we are full you can't leave your animal. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

You can't really call the SPCA and say in the past my husband has kicked this dog and injured it and I have had to leave the animal with him, can you do something. I don't think the SPCA can act on that. It would be really nice if there



was some action there, but my perception is anyway that there has to be an imminent situation where the animal is in danger. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

I can share my experience with the local SPCA is you can't even just take in a lost animal, without a fee, which I think is an issue for women who if they wanted to leave, and said I have no place for my pet and take it there, they will not accept it without charging them a fee. I know that for sure. *(Women's Shelter Outreach Worker)*

Even those in the employ of humane societies are not sure which of their branches offers what:

I was under the assumption this (boarding for shelters) was something all SPCA's did when I started, and then found out we were probably the only one. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

Employees from two different Alberta humane society sites where there was an ongoing relationship with a women's shelter were interviewed. In one case, the animals were kept only on-site. In another, a combination of boarding with foster parents and the humane society site was used.

It began because a previous manager kept getting calls from women and workers inquiring and decided it was a need. To get into emergency boarding there has to be a referral from a professional. It comes in spurts, at the moment we have 6 cases in care. We keep animals or have them fostered for the same time as the shelter keeps the women, 21-30 days, and will do an extension if needed, maybe an extra week. If they are not in contact with us, or we don't hear from them for 2 weeks, we will inquire if they are still at the shelter and adopt out if the animals appear to be abandoned. Last year, Oct –Sept 30 we had 48 cases, 70-80 % reclaim the animal. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

We try and put the animals for emergency boarding in foster care. This is safer for the animals and for us, no one knows where they are then except me. They find it easier to adapt in a house, it helps normalize things for the animal until they can be reunited with the owner. We vaccinate and de-worm them for free to protect them, and they are vet checked. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

Both of these interviewees report dealing with clients who appeared without a shelter referral as a problem. Security, if the abuser knows the animal is there, is a potential problem encountered to date at one site but not the other.

The only problem we have encountered is when people show up without a referral, getting hold of someone who can do that, especially if the client has not been there first. *(Animal Welfare Worker 2)*

One boyfriend came every day. The RCMP detachment is only 5 minutes away. One time he sent a friend. He grabbed me and cornered me. This was when we



were in the old building with only 3 staff and I was alone. I managed to lock myself in a room and call the RCMP. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

Both interviewees were strong proponents of such programs being part of the humane society mandate where circumstances allow, and both report that the women’s shelters they serve are grateful for the service.

I would encourage any organization like ours if they are thinking about it to just do it, it makes a difference when people are thinking about leaving a bad situation and we have never had an issue. The shelter believes it makes a difference; they even gave us a donation last Christmas from their staff. *(Animal Welfare Worker 2)*

This service is very important, the woman’s emotions are already high, and worry about the animals makes them higher. They are always grateful, always crying when they leave, most call every day to see how their pet is. When they have access, I send them photos by email and updates. I know how much of a difference we are really making for those women. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

***Veterinarians and Veterinary Associations***

<b>Veterinary Services (multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Most clients have never accessed a vet	4
Vet costs an issue for clients	3
Animal-human abuse link should be taught in vet school	2
Professional code needs to mandate reporting of suspected human abuse	2
Women’s shelter will pay some vet cost	2
Lack of knowledge by women’s shelter staff about vet services and costs	2
Vet-client confidentiality an issue for reporting suspected human abuse	2
In small towns, vets are nervous report, get involved in issue	1
Lack of client knowledge about vet services	1

That veterinarians might be in a position to play an important identification role was mentioned by a variety of professionals in different areas. For example, one reflected that:

I heard a lawyer say if the person is worried about the pets before the kids it can’t mean much, but often it becomes about the dog because they are not stupid enough to threaten the children. *(Written Communication, Lawyer)*



Veterinarians were reported by interviewees from both women's shelters and their own association to vary greatly on how much they were able to help women in need of animal care or housing. Some veterinarians were paid by other agencies or municipalities to do this, some did so voluntarily by agreement, and some simply could not accommodate. Access to vet care was also highly dependent on location; in some cases the closest vet was minutes away, in others, well over an hour.

Access to a vet is really good. You can get in to see a vet a lot quicker than you can see a doctor, as long as you have the money. We have taken animals to the vet clinic here, and the shelter has paid, and they have given us a discount because it has not been a very large bill. We don't budget for it specifically, it comes out of direct client costs, which is an area of our budget, and we consider that supporting the needs of a client. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*

She signed a vet consent form and we contacted the clinic, who advised it was not the first time for a broken bone. She always had an excuse, like the other dog did it. We did not have the other dog, did not know if it even existed. The vet issue is their oath of confidentiality to the client. They don't want to ruin their business by having word get out in a small town that they report clients. They don't want to get involved in the personal stuff generally. There needs to be something at vet school that teaches about the relationship between human and animal abuse, and some way of making them liable to report. *(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*

At a vet in town, you walk in the door and it is a \$75 exam fee. It's the reason they don't go. *(Kennel Owner)*

However it might be provided by veterinarians, there was demonstrated need for inoculation, spaying and neutering for most animals who appeared at women's shelters, as well as care for specific injuries or diseases.

The particular group of abused women who come to shelter, they are mostly quite poor, they live in poverty. There isn't money for vet bills. A lot of times they end up with pets, but there isn't very much money so the animal doesn't go to the vet, get its shots, or if it is kicked or abused, it still doesn't go to the vet. *(Women's Shelter Outreach Worker)*

The researcher conferred with faculty at two veterinary schools in Canada, and it did not appear there was any consistency with regard to the information future vets were exposed to during training with regard to the links between human and animal abuse, or related issues. Typical was an email response:

I am not aware of where or who might be covering this topic in the current curriculum. I do know that animal abuse, to which this is tied, is being covered in greater detail in the curriculum. *(Written Communication, Veterinary School Official)*





### ***Provincial Safe Pet Initiatives***

At least three Canadian provinces have cooperative, multi-agency initiatives in which the human-animal cruelty connection is addressed: Ontario, Manitoba and New Brunswick. Representatives from the Ontario and Manitoba initiatives were interviewed for this report, Ontario being the oldest and Manitoba being the newest such attempt.

Ontario's Pet Safe is currently run by the OVMA, with 80 of 1200 veterinary clinics participating in cooperation with local women's shelters. They provide vet care for up to two weeks with the goal being to remove the initial barrier to women leaving abusive situations. They are associated with the Farley Foundation, who will help abused women, seniors and the disabled with a variety of veterinary costs. The second component of the program has been created through a partnership with the OVMA and the Ontario government. Community members can sign-up at local veterinary clinics to become temporary pet foster parents. These volunteers will take care of the pets in their home, and have access to a veterinarian for expert advice on taking care of pets, when needed. In 2011, the OVMA estimated the annual cost of caring for a 40 pound adult dog at \$1856, a cat at \$1442.45 and puppies and kittens are more ([www.omva.org/pdf/fifi\\_fido\\_finances11.pdf](http://www.omva.org/pdf/fifi_fido_finances11.pdf)).

The spokesperson remarked

The clinic would take the animal for two weeks, do all the legal paperwork to protect themselves and the clients, feed and shelter the companion animals, do an exam and treat the normal issues such as lack of vaccinations. We now know that two weeks is just not enough time for people in this situation, and that is something we want to address as we move forward. Serious issues would be discussed with the client, who in some circumstances could apply to the Farley Foundation for assistance. *(OVMA's SafePet Program)*

He also noted they only deal with companion animals, but often get calls about livestock and large animals.

Manitoba has recently announced a multi-agency approach including: the Ministers for Family Services and Consumer Affairs, Labour and Immigration, and the Status of Women; Winnipeg Humane; MVMA; City of Winnipeg Animal Services; Police Domestic Violence Intervention Unit; Domestic Violence Support Service of Manitoba Justice; and 2 women's shelters. It is a pilot project operating only in Winnipeg over next few years. After assessment it may broaden its reach. It was initially started by the MVMA but after assessing all the needs with someone from Family Violence and Prevention, it became clear it was a huge and multi-faceted issue. Winnipeg Humane will now be coordinating, and responsible for housing animals through their foster family data base.

Safe Pet is described in a November 2011 government news release (<http://news.gov.mb.ca/news/print,index.html?item+12523>) as one of five related initiatives that is:

A leading edge shelter program for family pets while survivors transition from abusive situations, based on findings that people don't feel comfortable leaving



a relationship if a pet is left behind and that children experience further trauma when a pet is left at risk in the home.

A spokesperson states:

Rural shelters would like it to be province-wide, but we can't do that right now until we are sure we have solved all the potential issues. The OVMA realized it was a big mistake to try and do it provincially all at once. It is a huge partnership with fuzzy feelings all over, so we think it should succeed and have funding. We have no idea what the eventual costs will be, it depends how many animals are actually in need. We need to see what the demand and issues are, that is why we are starting with a small pilot. *(Manitoba Safe Pet Program)*

Those reporting on both programs felt they met an important need, and offered comments for others wishing to undertake similar work:

I think the largest drain on the veterinarians is goodwill and time. They really do want to help, but as they are volunteers, as with any sort of volunteerism, care has to be paid to ensure they are not being taken advantage of or drained of their desire to help by the trouble and stress. Not all clinics are open on weekends or provide boarding, so some are relying on their staff, on a paid or volunteer basis, to cover hours they do not normally work. *(OVMA's SafePet Program)*

Types of animals are a concern. Being a city project likely prevents us from having to deal with large animals like livestock, and only starting with two shelters should help manage the volume...There is concern about the abuser showing up at any of the cooperating agencies, as they are all listed on the brochure. *(Manitoba Safe Pet Program)*

## Summary

Service providers voiced the same concerns as the clients and witnesses. They noted the general difficulty in leaving abusive situations for women with companion animals, and that for rural or farm women with livestock it was very difficult if not impossible. Such women rarely appeared at women's shelters despite some actually making calls for information. Housing post-shelter for women with pets was seen to be problematic, and children were affected by the separation from their pets. Services were not seen as coordinated or predictable, and one agency could be unaware of another. Women were often seen to be in a forced choice situation, having to choose among their own safety, that of their children, and that of their animals. Legal issues around pet ownership and the retrieval of pets were also noted. As one women's shelter worker remarked:

I would like to reiterate, I think sometimes the animals are the casualties of these situations. They are sacrificed in order for the rest of the family to be safe. *(Women's Shelter Executive Director)*



Service providers reported various kinds of attempts to solve the issue of what to do with the animals when a woman needed or wanted to leave. *Every* service provider interviewed recognized that the problem is easy to describe but hard to solve, and most noted that it was harder for large animals/livestock than companion animals.

Of the various solutions available for families and animals in abusive situations, coordinated service was reported to offer the best possibility by both women's shelter and other kinds of service providers. Alberta based providers were unaware of Safe Pet projects, or did not comment on them. They did unanimously report being unable to do everything themselves, and agreed that a solution for animal housing would be very enabling for women in abusive situations. As one agency who coordinated between a women's shelter and animal foster parents remarked:

This service is of the utmost importance, there would be no justification for stopping it. We need to expand to other people in need if anything. It costs us less than for adoptable animals actually, because they don't stay as long.  
*(Animal Welfare Worker 1)*



## Section 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Three questions were initially proposed as the investigative topics for this research report. Questions One and Two are responded to by Conclusions, while Question Three is answered in the Implications section.

### Conclusions

#### ***Question 1: Are There Impacts on the Decision Making of Domestic Violence Victims in Alberta Which are Created Specifically Through Their Ownership of Companion Animals or Livestock?***

Based on both the quantitative and qualitative findings, it seems reasonable to conclude that for Question One, decision making **is** impacted for women who are attempting to leave domestic violence and also have to take into consideration the safety and placement of companion animals or livestock. Some exceptions to this finding might be made for Aboriginal women, who have a much lesser degree of individual animal ownership than the general population, and for refugee/immigrant women who appeared so seldom at the participating women's shelters that no conclusions can be drawn about them as a sub-group.

Of the women who did go through shelter intake and participated in the questionnaire, those having both children and animals form the second largest sub-group (**25.33%**). Given both the victim and service provider descriptions of how hard it is for this sub-group of women (especially those with livestock) to reach a women's shelter, 25% is likely a low estimate of those whose decision making might be impacted in such situations.

Of those women who had animals and responded to the relevant question, 35.82% were subject to threats or actual harm in relation to their animals. Of those who had animals that were actually threatened or harmed, 54.1% also had children. 79.16% of respondents whose animals were threatened believed it was possible that the threats could be carried out. Of the 48 respondents whose animals had experienced threats or harm, 41 (85.4%) respondents indicated actual acts of harm had occurred.

**26.87%** of those women who had animals were initially afraid to get help. As all the women reporting had already made it to the women's shelter, this is likely an under-stating of the fears of women in the general public. **39.39%** of women whose animals had been subject to threats or harm knew their animals remained in unsafe conditions upon leaving, but left anyway for safety and other reasons. **58.98%** delayed leaving, representing a mixed group of those whose animals were threatened or harmed, and those who simply had responsibility for the animals. Of the 31 respondents who specifically had animals that had been threatened or harmed and answered this question, **74.19%** delayed leaving. This represents a significant percentage for that specific sub-group, who likely are the ones most disposed to having their decision making affected.



It was clear and unequivocal from the qualitative interviews that the presence of companion animals and livestock was of great importance in the lives of women and their children. Control through the animals as a form of abuse and a means of preventing women and their children from leaving was so frequently noted that it was coded and themed separately. The interview participants made it very clear that, for women with animals they wished to protect by bringing them with as they left, solutions and assistance were not easy to find. They believed that many rural or farm women, especially those with livestock, were so affected by their circumstances that they simply did not, or could not, leave.

The effects of domestic violence and the resultant decisions women must make were reported to be life-long. They were made significantly worse by the extra concerns for their companion animals and livestock.

It doesn't go away when you leave, it stays with you and it haunts you, and if people think that they can walk away and have their dog killed as a result to get even, and that you can keep living and forget it, it's not possible. You remember, and you remember how much you give up, just to have a little bit of peace in your life. I don't think that anyone should have to give up their best friend in order to get away from that. I just don't think it is fair for people to have to make that choice, it's just not fair. *(Respondent 7)*

Responses to this first research question from service providers were similar to those of the victims themselves. They believed animals were seen by the women as part of the family. Women did not want to leave without them and they would put themselves at risk by either staying when it was unsafe or going back to get their animals. In general, service providers believed at least some client decision making was impacted by fear and anxiety about their animals; fear of leaving them, and fear of taking them with. Women were often seen to be in a forced-choice situation, having to choose among their own safety, the best interest of their children, and the future of their animals.

Service providers universally reported that the group that found it hardest to leave their animals and come to the women's shelter was the farm women. They might speak to an intake worker or request information from a service, but rarely did they leave and appear at the shelter.

Professionals were in agreement with the women interviewed; having animals made it harder to find a place to go to either immediately or after time in a shelter, and the time in the shelter might become longer because of the inability to find housing with the animal. All these inter-related issues were believed to impact decision making. As Ascione (2005) found:

The dilemma for many of these women is that, in some cases, their social isolation and lack of economic resources may preclude leaving pets with family, friends, or at a commercial kennel. When pets are left behind, they may become prey for the batterer. If women take their pets with them, they will usually discover that domestic violence shelters are not equipped or willing to house pets. (p. 145)



It would seem reasonable that all the factors presented above, in combination with others referred in more detail in the body of the report, indicate that a valid and reliable conclusion for the women in this study is: **decision making regarding leaving an abusive situation was negatively impacted by the presence of companion animals, and perhaps to an even greater degree, by the ownership of livestock.**

### ***Question 2: Are Children also Impacted, and in What Ways?***

In response to Question Two, direct evidence from children themselves proved hard to come by. However, using the qualitative responses of three former child witnesses, service providers who work regularly with child victims, and the statements of victims themselves about their children in both the quantitative and qualitative data, **it seems clear that children are impacted by the same situations as their mothers. These effects are negative, and appear to be both long and short term in nature.**

**55.74%** women presented at the women's shelter with accompanying children and **25.33%** presented with children and had animals at least up to the point they left home. Potentially, one quarter of children were affected, at minimum, by separation from their animals.

For many, fear and anxiety about specific harm to these animals was another outcome. Of the **26** respondents with children where animals had been threatened or harmed, **22 (84.6%)** believed the children saw or heard those threats, and **16 (61.53%)** believed their children were aware of the actual harm done to the animals. For **13 (50%)** child witnesses, it was reported by the mother that the child's own animal was harmed.

Although most women reported trying to shield their children from both the human and animal violence, they also reported a wide variety of effects on their children from witnessing. It is likely this represents an under-reporting of what children really observed or felt, as some things likely remain unknown or denied by the adult interviewee. A variety of social/emotional symptoms were observed in the children including fear, anxiety, sadness and loss of control. Interviewees whose children were now old enough to be in their own relationships believed that such relationships were affected negatively by their past experiences with both human and animal violence.

For the three women/child witnesses who were interviewed, encountering animal and human and animal violence as children meant they suffered both short and long-term personal repercussions as a result. As one noted, "I never had an old pet."

They have all felt the need to engage in therapeutic interventions as adults. All of them in one way or another recognized that for mothers, leaving an abusive situation would be harder with animals. The basic dilemma was understood by them much as it was by the other women: protecting self and children versus saving the animals, and the difficulty in doing both. All reported that the past never quite left them, and never stopped impacting the future, in both positive (all have animals) and negative ways. As one remarked, to move forward from the past,



What's needed is support to get out of the parental relationship and let a new legacy start with the next generation, like one of my brothers or my present husband. *(Respondent 17)*

Service providers noted that children were affected not just by witnessing the violence, but by the separation from their animals. Children would sometimes request their mothers return home, over worry about animal care and safety. The majority of service providers agreed it was difficult to determine the exact effects on children, unless they demonstrated their concerns in highly visible ways. As one parent noted, with regard to the role of service providers,

They (children) will tell you anything, unless they have been programmed not to. My kids were programmed not to. *(Respondent 7)*

No service provider, however, expressed any opinion other than that witnessing human and animal abuse as a child was devastating for that child on many levels, including those related specifically to animals. These included but were not limited to: having to leave the animals at home (safe or not) for the safety of the family, worrying about their care and safety, missing their emotional companionship, feeling guilty about not saving them, and fear of never seeing them again. Therefore, as McIntosh (2004) noted:

...when a child reports any such abuse to a counsellor, teacher or other adult, that person needs to be aware of the potential significance and implications of this information. Further exploration of a child's disclosure of animal abuse could lead to disclosures of family violence and child abuse. (p. 13)

Based on the anecdotal evidence provided throughout the body of this report, **it seems reasonable to conclude that children are negatively impacted when their mothers must leave a situation that is abusive and animals are involved in the decision making.**

## Implications

### ***Question 3: What Might Be the Implications for the Organization and Others, if any, of the Findings of the Study?***

*Implication 1: That there is a role to be played by humane societies in addressing the findings from this study, as listed above. While it cannot be humane societies' responsibility alone, one interviewee pleaded that:*

I think that the animals have to be treated as family members, because especially in an abusive situation, they become family members, they become really important to the kids, they will go off and hug their dogs and just spend hours with their animals, because that's a safe place. People have to realize just how important they are, to that family, and for them to know to get out of there it is very difficult to think they left their animals behind would be unbearable, especially for a child, to know they left their beloved animal behind. They have



to know that this is a lifeline, and they can't cut it, and they better take the animal out with the family. *(Respondent 7)*

In general, women and children need to know there is somewhere they can leave an animal and come back and get it when it is safe, whenever that is possible. As emphasized by one interviewee:

And if they can't go in the home with them, which I understand, then they have to be put in a place where they can go and visit them and know they are safe, and they are happy and that they are going to get them back. That gives them something to look forward to. It can't be like we are going to keep them for 6 weeks, for 2 weeks until you can get your house and you life together. You live in absolute chaos, and you can't even think anymore. I lost my soul. I lost who I was. I was dead. I was off for 6 months before I could start communicating with people and start working with the public again. *(Respondent 4)*

A recommendation from a former child witness included the suggestion that:

I think they (humane societies) could provide a program that if you are a woman in need, here are the options. Maybe here is a boarding facility, I don't know how many women in that situation have the finances to do it, but for someone like myself, I could pay to board my cats in the interim. I guess they could also provide fostering, or a list of places, if you need to find an apartment, here are pet friendly apartments that you can get into, here is a place you can call. If you have a livestock situation, we will go out and investigate, and provide an update, and keep an eye on them for you. *(Respondent 15)*

*Implication 2: Given the interconnected nature of the issues surrounding human and animal abuse, no one agency can possibly do the necessary work on their own, nor would it be advantageous to try. Medical, veterinary, social service/mental health, government, education, justice and policing agencies, to list but a few, would need to be part of any workable solution through multi-disciplinary, community based partnerships.*

In a private communication Dr. Debbie Stowen, of the Ontario Veterinary College provided a succinct summary:

An integrated /interdisciplinary approach is needed to address this issue, which should include the veterinary profession. There is increasing recognition of the various roles, responsibilities and potential contributions of different agencies.

Further, as one women's shelter resident pointed out, it needs to be seen as a community problem:

I really think that the community needs to be aware of the impact the animals have on anybody leaving, and the supports that are going into it. The RCMP, the social workers, they need to know, There needs to be a mandatory notification, if they go to a home and there is domestic violence and animals in the home, report it to the SPCA, just as it is for child welfare if you are aware of a child





being abused. The SPCA should have to have the right to go in on suspicion, don't wait until the animal is hurt. *(Respondent 8)*

The list of possible inter-agency links provided by both interviewees and professionals was extremely broad and inclusive. The following are the top 10 most often identified needs:

- Professional training regarding the links between human and animal violence for all those likely to come in contact with adults, children or animals that have been abused.
- Cross-training and cross-referral policies between animal, human and judicial/enforcement professionals. Each profession would need to make clear what the restrictions and prohibitions are for their work and engage collaboratively to remove unnecessary barriers to working together.
- Inquiry by all professionals, where it would be relevant, as to whether a presenting abused adult or child has animals, whether those animals have been threatened or harmed, and if they are attempting to leave, whether concern for the animals cause them additional anxiety.
- Including arrangements for animals in all safety or outcomes planning for domestic violence victims attempting to leave abusive relationships, wherever possible.
- Partnerships between human service and animal service organizations to assist in finding solutions to the animal placement problem for domestic violence victims who are trying to leave or recover from abusive situations.
- Legislative, policing and judicial changes to enable long term improvements for domestic violence victims and their animals in abusive situations. Such changes would need to be backed by political will.
- Specific and focused assistance plans for domestic violence victims from rural and farm environments, which are different and perhaps more difficult to leave. Or as one woman stated: "Rural help for rural families until they have gotten out, or to help them try to leave."
- School and educator involvement as partners in pro-active education and reporting of possible abuse of children, adults or animals, given their access to children on a daily basis.
- Addressing victims' lack of knowledge about the nature of abuse and the resources available through a cooperative multi-agency focus. Suggestions including posting information in places from public bathroom stalls to grocery stores and pubs, as well as the more obvious places such as medical and veterinary offices, counseling centres, and libraries. As one woman who received assistance noted, "on my own, I would have had no idea." In rural, farm and reserve areas the use of radio to impart such information was specifically mentioned a number of times.
- Assistance for domestic violence victims leaving abusive situations in finding housing that will take animals.

## Summary

In summary, there is much could and can be done to assist women and their children who find themselves needing to leave an abusive situation and simultaneously care for and about their animals and livestock. Realistically, little is likely to happen that has a major and lasting impact unless it is



facilitated through a multi-faceted, multi-organization approach. Were such efforts supported by political will and resources as they are in some provinces, chances of success would be even higher. Humane societies generally, and the Alberta SPCA in particular, are well positioned to begin laying the foundations for such work.

It is hoped that this research study will provide background and current data as to needs and desired outcomes. However, as an interviewee pointed out “what really counts is what you can’t see and is hard to measure.” It will be up to interested parties from all walks of life, and all genders, to move this work forward. The last word goes to an interviewee, who has fortunately moved beyond being a victim. She remarked:

It would give me so much closure to see something like this go ahead, to know that my dog didn’t just die for no reason. *(Respondent 7)*



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