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). 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). 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). 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). 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.)

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.)

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).

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 10th, 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.