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. *(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)