

Local Agencies Document Links Between Animal Cruelty, Human Violence

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In Ontario, a humane society collaborates with a child welfare agency on a cross-reporting project

Out of a grim situation—a cruelty case involving a dog starved to death—came the idea for a recent innovative research project undertaken by two Ontario, Canada, organizations, the Guelph Humane Society and Family and Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington County.

The year-long initiative, designed to encourage cross-agency reporting of animal cruelty incidents and child abuse and neglect cases, began when a humane society investigator recounted the tale of the neglected dog: "I just came back from court and ... a woman was on the stand and she disclosed ... that it was either starve her children or starve her dog," the shaken investigator told officials from both agencies. "I didn't know the woman had children."



It was a "light bulb moment" for family services supervisor Mary Zilney. She resolved to find a way to require family services investigators to look into companion animals' treatment and humane society investigators to examine children's well-being in homes they visited. With input from the humane society, then headed by Lorna Ronald, Zilney created an investigation checklist that became the basis of a year-long collaboration to collect data and encourage cross-reporting of cases.

The project became a reunion of sorts; decades ago, from 1893 to 1926, the two organizations were one—and now they would work together once again.

Investigators—50 from the social services agency and four from the humane society—first attended a two-hour training session. "Certainly in retrospect that should have been much longer," Zilney says. "We gave an overview of our agencies' mandates, what we do, and then we spoke about indicators of child abuse and neglect, and [humane society investigators] spoke about indicators of animal abuse and neglect."

The resulting statistics, gathered between February 1, 2001, and January 31, 2002, did not surprise Zilney. Of the 26 cases that were cross-reported, seven presented cruelty concerns for both agencies. These situations ranged from neglect of both children and companion animals to domestic violence accompanied by animal cruelty. A detailed discussion of the project's findings will be published in an upcoming issue of *Child Welfare Journal*.

Data Collected by Family and Children's Services

Number of FCS investigations	1485
Homes with animals present	747 (50%)
Referrals for investigation made to HS	16 (2.15%)

Data Collected by Guelph Humane Society

Number of checklists completed	247
Homes with children present	94 (39%)
Referrals or reports made to FCS	10 (10.6%)

"The goal was just to gather statistics," says Zilney, "... because we went in with the belief that there is a link between animal and human cruelty."

Other organizations have formed similar partnerships in response to this connection. In fact, in some parts of the United States such cooperation is even

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As a result of a project undertaken by two Canadian agencies, social services workers in Guelph, Ontario, are now better equipped to help neglected or abused animals like this one.

mandated, says Virginia M. Prevas, manager of The HSUS' First Strike campaign. "More states are adopting legislation that requires cross-training and cross-reporting between agencies," Prevas says.

In the Guelph study, family services investigators were concerned with the treatment of animals in one out of five pet-owning homes they visited.

But unlike their counterparts at the humane society, who cross-reported cases in which even the potential for child abuse was present, family services investigators often tried to solve pet-related problems themselves, says Zilney. "Sometimes, when an FCS investigator would go out to see a child playing rough with an animal, rather than reporting that to the Humane Society—[which] would have gone out themselves to do some education—the workers themselves did some behavioral technique, and didn't report it," Zilney recalls.

"This is likely one manifestation of the hierarchy and value difference between animals and children in our society," Zilney and Ronald wrote in their report. "In fact, some FCS workers did not view the project as relevant to their work of child protection and were opposed to looking at risk factors for animals (likely reflected in data collection on their checklists)."

Zilney believes that more thorough training in the beginning could have prevented confusion about the indicators that investigators should report—and probably would have resulted in a larger number of case referrals. As a result of those lessons learned, both the Humane Society and Family and Children's Services have changed the way they conduct orientations for employees.

"Both of us have incorporated training for all new staff around the cruelty link," says Zilney, "and we call each other back and forth all the time to run cases by each other." To further improve communication, a protocol now being developed will discuss procedures for the cross-reporting of cases and the duty to report to Family and Children's Services.

The study has proved beneficial to the organizations in other ways. Most FCS investigators found that talking to children about animals revealed information that was useful to their own investigations, Zilney says. At the same time, humane society employees better understand child welfare and have learned more about the link between animal and child cruelty and neglect, says Ronald. Humane society investigators still use the checklist to aid in cruelty investigations. On a larger scale, the project "raised the profile of our organization with other animal welfare organizations, the public, politicians, and other community agencies and groups," says Ronald.

Zilney believes research into the cruelty link is at a threshold. "Everything is so intertwined that to me it feels like where we were 20 years ago when we looked at violence against women and domestic violence," she says. "It looks like we're on the cutting edge of the cruelty link, and that 20 years from now it is going to be so well-known and widespread ... that it is going to help clinicians one hundredfold in doing assessments."

Ronald agrees. "This is just the beginning in my opinion. You must be encouraged by the first steps and not discouraged by how long change takes. Everything you do matters," she says. "[W]hat I am stressing is how important it is for the community to work together to reduce inappropriate and inhumane behavior. None of us can do it on our own."

If you're interested in learning more about how to cross-train and cross-report, please contact The HSUS's First Strike campaign at firststrike@hsus.org or 888-213-0956.



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