

**ANIMAL PROTECTION
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY TEAM
OF WASHINGTON COUNTY**

The Washington County Animal Protection Multi-Disciplinary Team is developing the most comprehensive approach to dealing with the link between animal abuse and domestic violence in the nation. The result will be to better assist victims of domestic violence leave the cycle of abuse and to help effectively prosecute batterers.

The Link Between Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse

Many studies have documented the startling link between domestic violence and animal abuse. For example:

- **Most perpetrators of domestic violence are also harming the family pets.** One study reported that 48 percent to 71 percent of battered women reported that their pets had also been threatened, harmed, or killed by their partners. A national survey of battered women's shelters determined that 85 percent of shelters indicated that women seeking safety described incidents of pet abuse in their families. Pet abuse is another form of family violence.
- **Victims of domestic violence will stay in a dangerous situation if they believe their pets are in danger.** Studies have shown that a significant percentage of battered women (18 percent to 48 percent) delay leaving a dangerous situation out of concern for their pets' safety. If the pet in the family had been abused, a recent study found that 65 percent of women imperil themselves by staying in order to protect their pets.
- **The most statistically reliable predictor for determining if a child will grow up to be a violent offender of any kind is witnessing animal abuse as a child.**

In short, batterers use pets to threaten and control their victims. Children who see this cycle are very likely to repeat it. Intervening on behalf of the pets can be one of the most important strategies a community can undertake to help these families.

The Washington County Solution

The Animal Protection Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) was formed in April 2010 to address this problem. It brings together law enforcement, prosecutors, advocates for survivors of domestic violence, social service organizations, the County animal services division, and non-profit animal rescue groups. Its design is perhaps the most comprehensive approach to solving this problem being undertaken anywhere in the county.

Until the MDT was formed, there was little meaningful collaboration in the community among the people dealing with the inter-related problems of animal abuse and domestic violence. Advocates who work with victims of domestic violence did not see animal care as a priority when there were so many challenges they were facing. Animal Services officers didn't typically follow up on issues with children or other human victims in the home when they were removing animals that had been terribly neglected or abused.

Not only has this coalition functioned smoothly, it has been incredibly productive.

The MDT set forth the following goals:

- Developing safe housing alternatives for pets while owners are in domestic violence shelters
- Cross-train county agencies to identify animal cruelty, domestic violence and child abuse
- Develop a coordinated response to hoarding situations
- Provide therapeutic intervention to children who witness animal cruelty or domestic violence
- Educate the community about the link between animal cruelty and domestic violence
- Advocate for stricter sentencing guidelines in felony animal abuse cases
- Create a program for trained service dogs to accompany victims of domestic violence in court

Concrete Results

For a program that was formed only 10 months ago, the impact has been extraordinary.

Following its goals established at the onset of the collaboration, the following has been accomplished:

1. Develop safe housing alternatives for pets while owners are in domestic violence shelters.

Monika's House: The top priority was to make Monika's House, Washington County's only domestic violence shelter, pet-friendly. The MDT brought in volunteers for Fences for Fido and PetSmart to build five dog runs. Monika's House is now the third shelter in Oregon and one of only 35 among the nation's more than 2,000 domestic violence shelters across the country to allow pets. One of the MDT members worked with a private donor to secure a donation of \$2000 to Monika's House.

Protect My Pets: Not all victims of domestic violence live at Monika's house. The District Attorney's Office coordinates with Washington County Animal Services when there are people who need a safe haven for their pets. Animal Services will accept the animals of people who are fleeing domestic violence. These animals are being boarded for free at the Bonnie L. Hays Small Animal Shelter or through non-profit animal welfare organizations Indigo Rescue, Animal Aid and the Oregon Humane Society. This program is allowing animals to receive care and medical attention while their owners successfully find housing. (Note that funding is needed to make this program sustainable.)

Restraining Orders: The question of which person has the legal right to have the animal in his or her custody has been a serious barrier in the past to finding safe alternatives for the animals in these situations. Since abusers are by definition controlling people, there needs to be clear authority for the person fleeing the violence to be able to take the animal to a safe haven, such as Monika's House or the Protect My Pets program. The Domestic Violence Resource Center assists victims to add pets to their restraining orders. This is now a common practice in Washington County, while it is not common in other parts of the state. Again, that is the effect of the MDT's work.

2. Provide meaningful training for policing agencies, animal control officers, and social service agencies that integrates the investigation of domestic violence complaints with the investigation of animal abuse. It is clear that Animal Services officers need to notice the frightened child hiding in the corner of the room when they are answering a call about animal abuse or neglect – and know what agency to call. Police agencies need to think about the animals when they are dealing with domestic violence. Social service agencies need to understand the resources available when they look at the family.

This training has started.

Police Officer Training: The MDT is sponsoring a workshop on March 23 that will feature Scott Heiser. This former Benton County prosecutor, now Senior Staff Attorney for the Animal Legal Defense Fund, will be teaching police agencies and animal control officers how to deal identify and deal with puppy mill and hoarding cases. There are 45 law enforcement and animal control professionals from around the state of Oregon signed up for the training.

The stringent investigation and prosecution of animal abuse violations is an important component to the MDT's efforts. Sometimes, the best evidence to convict a batterer is the damage that was done to an animal. **Training that helps to prosecute animal abuse will have the effect of helping the human victims of the batterer, as well.**

Animal Services Division Training: Washington County Animal Services is dedicated to training its staff to respond to these issues. All Washington County Animal Services staff received training from Whitney Zeigler (District Attorney Victim Assistance Specialist) and Deborah Wood (Manager of Animal Services) on the link between domestic violence

and animal abuse. Two Animal Services Officers attended the Oregon Department of Justice Domestic Violence Conference. All Washington County Animal Services Officers, as well as the management team and the organization's fulltime veterinary technician, will be attending training next month that focuses on veterinary forensic investigation. The Animal Services Officers have had three recent trainings with attorneys with Washington County (Deputy District Attorney and County Counsel) for correctly dealing with search and seizure issues.

Community Education: Deborah Wood and Whitney Zeigler have made 10 presentations to more than 200 people who are working to assist victims of domestic violence about the overlap between domestic violence and animal abuse and letting them know the work of the MDT. More presentations are scheduled.

Additional Plans: Videos are being scripted by members of the MDT that will go to policing agencies for training purposes.

3. Provide assistance to children who have witnessed domestic violence and animal abuse: The MDT is creating a program that addresses the increased probability that children who are exposed to violence in the home (whether to people or to pets) will themselves use violence to solve problems as they get older. The proposed tool is a therapy dog team (therapy dog with a dog handler and a counselor) who not only model affectionate, respectful, and gentle behavior (traditional therapy dog role) but also actively teach positive ways to "get what you want" from a pet or a person. This program will allow the children to teach the dogs tricks, using only positive methods, with reinforcements of treats and praise. The MDT member heading the project is an experienced therapy dog handler. She is consulting with the Pacific University counseling program and nationally-recognized trainers to tailor a program for the needs of Washington County's at-risk children.

Funding Needs

Much has been accomplished with no staffing and no funding for this program. With a modest commitment of funding, the Washington County MDT can become an unparalleled prototype for other communities to emulate. We are asking for help in two vital areas.

The following is needed for that level of success:

1. Funding for the Protect My Pets Program. We need to be able to assure victims of domestic violence that they can flee from their batterers with their pets. Historically, only one shelter (the Oregon Humane Society) has had a program for taking in pets that belong to victims of domestic violence. They estimate they can help only about one out of every 12 requests.

Washington County Animal Services has made the policy that it will accept all pets belonging to victims of domestic violence. However, the County shelter does not have the capacity to hold animals for long periods of time. Three nonprofits (the Oregon Humane Society, Indigo Rescue and Animal Aid) have agreed to house dogs and cats as part of this program. However, this model is not sustainable without funds to care for the animals while they are in the care of nonprofits. Additionally, there may be some circumstances in which the best alternative would be a private boarding facility (at negotiated discounted rates).

We are asking for funding to provide for reimbursement for boarding and medical expenses for animals in this program. We would like to be able to guarantee that every domestic violence victim who is working with the District Attorney's Office or the Domestic Violence Resource Center will know that the family's pets will be safe.

2. Funding for a One-Person Staff for the MDT. We are asking for three years of funding to staff the MDT. Staffing duties are currently performed by the County's Manager of Animal Services and a Victim Assistance Specialist in the District Attorney's Office. This model cannot be sustained, since these employees are putting in long hours above their already long schedules.

If the county is going to have comprehensive training for policing agencies, social service agencies, and prosecutors, staffing is needed to create and implement that training. If every domestic violence victim with no place for his or her pet is to be helped, it takes staffing.

We are asking for a three-year start-up grant to pay for a position to do this work. The staff member would be placed in Washington County Animal Services, reporting to the Manager. The position would be designed to collaborate with all the partnering organizations.

For More Information:

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