

Survey of Professionals in Adult Protective Services

Elder abuse is perhaps the most under-reported form of family violence. Some experts estimate that less than 7% of elder abuse incidents come to the attention of authorities (Pillemer and Finkelhor, 1988).

According to the National Center on Elder Abuse (1997), reports of such abuse rose from 177,000 to 293,000 in the period from 1986 to 1996, an increase of 150%. Advocates for vulnerable adults are beginning to see the need to enlist many other professionals, including animal care and control professionals and veterinarians, in the effort to identify and respond to people in need.

Although many professionals within animal protection have provided case histories in which there was a clear overlap between elder abuse and animal cruelty, it was uncertain if social services professionals recognized this connection. In 2001, The HSUS and the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), with funding from the Dr. Scholl Foundation, distributed a questionnaire to Adult Protective Service supervisors and front-line case workers to assess their level of awareness of and response to these issues within their agencies.

Responses were received from nearly 200 professionals in 40 states. The survey indicated that many of these professionals recognized the connection, and often encountered situations requiring sensitivity to the attachment that older clients had to their pets. However, few agencies provided special training or had policies in place to address these issues, and there had been little attempt to coordinate activities of humane societies, animal control agencies, and social services involved in protecting vulnerable adults.

Specifically:

- More than 35% of respondents reported that clients seen by Adult Protective Services (APS) talk about pets having been threatened, injured, killed, or denied care by a caregiver.
- More than 45% reported that they have encountered evidence of intentional abuse or neglect of animals when visiting clients.
- More than 92% said that APS workers encountered animal neglect coexisting with a client's inability to care for himself/herself. This indicates that reports of animal neglect may be an important warning sign for the presence of self-neglect by vulnerable adults.
- More than 75% of respondents noted that clients' concern for their pets' welfare affected decisions about interventions or additional services. Many people indicated that their clients often refused services or housing if the needs of their pets were not taken into consideration. However, few agencies had established working relationships with the appropriate animal care and control agencies in their area.
- Despite these concerns, only about 35% indicated that their agency included questions about a client's animals during the intake/assessment process; fewer than 25% had policies in place for reporting suspected animal cruelty; and only 19% had formal or informal cross-reporting and/or cross-training with animal agencies.

Solutions:

In December 2001, the first National Summit on Elder Abuse was held in Washington, D.C. This meeting brought together 80 national leaders on elder abuse and family violence. The HSUS was invited to participate in recognition of its experience in establishing strategies to educate professionals and the public on issues of abuse.

Among the many recommendations made at the Summit was a call to fund a national elder abuse training curriculum that can be used as a toolkit by a variety of professionals, including those in humane work, animal care and control, and veterinary medicine. The brochure created by The HSUS and NCEA on the connection between elder abuse and animal cruelty was an important first step in developing that toolkit.

To request this free brochure or additional information about the connection between animal cruelty and human violence, please call 1-888-213-0956 or e-mail firststrike@hsus.org.

References:

National Center on Elder Abuse. 1997. Trends in elder abuse in domestic settings. Elder Abuse Information Series No. 2.

Pillemer, K. and Finkelhor, D. 1988. The prevalence of elder abuse: A random sample survey. *The Gerontologist*, 28: 51-57.