

Elder Abuse and Animal Cruelty

On January 20, 2001, an anonymous caller to the Washington, D.C. Humane Society reported that her neighbor's daughter had thrown a dead dog into the trash dumpster. Animal control officers arrived at the scene to discover that the dead dog was only the tip of the iceberg. They also found an emaciated and disoriented 90-year-old woman. The floor of the house was covered with trash and dog feces, parts of the ceiling had caved in, and mildew covered the walls.

Reports indicated that the daughter often left her elderly mother alone for several weeks at a time. The animal control officers rescued the remaining dogs and contacted adult protective services, which arranged to have the woman transported to a hospital. The two agencies coordinated their actions to meet the needs of victims of two different types of abuse—yet all of whom required emergency care. If it hadn't been for the report of a dead dog, the suffering of both human and animal victims would have continued unnoticed.

Animal cruelty or neglect can often be a warning sign of other forms of abuse, including elder abuse. That's why The HSUS has joined forces with the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Aging to share information on the animal cruelty/elder abuse connection. We're coordinating our efforts around Older Americans Month, the period set aside each May to honor the country's senior citizens.

The informational campaign is clearly needed. According to the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study*, "approximately 450,000 elderly persons in domestic settings were abused and/or neglected during 1996." When the cases of elderly self-neglect were added, the numbers rose to more than 550,000.

What's more, according to the study, "data show that family members were the perpetrators in nine out of ten (89.7 percent) substantiated incidents of domestic elder abuse and neglect. Adult children of elder abuse victims were the most likely perpetrators of substantiated maltreatment (47.3 percent). Spouses represented the second largest group of perpetrators (19.3 percent)."

When a family member abuses an elderly relative's pet, the motivations may be complex. The perpetrator may neglect or abuse an elder's pet as a form of control or retaliation, out of frustration over their caretaking responsibilities, or as a way to extract financial assets.

Many older adults are particularly attached to their pets. Companion animals not only play a vital role in the lives of older adults, they also represent important links to the past. Pets provide comfort and stress relief, humor, attention, protection, and they foster social interaction between older adults and others. This special relationship, however, also makes pets vulnerable to abuse by those who want to exert power and control over an elderly person.

Cases of extreme animal neglect may also reflect an older adult's inability to provide adequate care for him or herself, and thus indicate the need for assistance.

The good news is that domestic elder abuse and animal cruelty can be investigated and stopped—if these actions are brought to the attention of authorities such as adult protective services, animal care and control, the local humane society, or law enforcement. All of these agencies can also help prevent violence by working together cooperatively and forming inter-agency collaborations or partnerships.

Cross-reporting suspected abuse of animals or elders is crucial, too. Two states have already made cross-reporting a requirement: A California law requires animal control officers to report suspected elder abuse, and Illinois requires the same of veterinarians.

The information below was included in our promotional packet for Older Americans Month, which reached hundreds of people who provide services to the elderly.

There are ways that all of us can help prevent animal cruelty and elder abuse. They include:

- **Become familiar with the signs of elder abuse.** These include physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, abandonment, and financial or material exploitation.

- **Check the physical condition of pets.** Ask about any recent health problems or injuries. Pets are often malnourished in abusive homes; their ribs may be visible, and their food bowls may be empty.
- **Examine the animals' behavior.** Pets in abusive homes are often frightened, withdrawn, aggressive, or overly protective.
- **Ask questions.** If a pet is suddenly missing or has been moved outside, ask why. Responses to these questions may lead you to discover animal cruelty, and give the older person a chance to share concerns or report abuse.
- **Find out who to call in your community if you suspect animal cruelty or elder abuse.** The blue pages in your phone book will include numbers for local social service and animal protection agencies.
- **Support legislation to improve animal cruelty and elder abuse laws.**

The First Strike® campaign can help in the process of bringing professionals together from a variety of agencies. We facilitate workshops and provide educational materials specifically for various professionals working to prevent family violence. For more information, please call our First Strike toll free line at 1-888-213-0956. For a free brochure on the connection between elder abuse and animal cruelty, please e-mail firststrike@hsus.org.

**The study was conducted by the National Center on Elder Abuse at the American Public Human Services Association (formally known as the American Public Welfare Association) and the Maryland-based social science and survey research firm, Westat.*

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