



# NATIONAL LINK COALITION

*Working together to stop violence  
against people and animals*

## **The National Resource Center on the Link between Animal Abuse and Human Violence**

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### **CROSS-REPORTING ANIMAL, CHILD AND ELDER ABUSE**

#### **To Whom it May Concern:**

Laws that support front-line professionals' ability to share information about suspected child, elder and animal maltreatment are critically needed. The National Link Coalition and our 3,500 members in 50 states (110 in Ohio) and 54 nations believe that identifying all maltreatment in the home is essential to **ensure family safety, strengthen families, and build humane communities**. Cross-reporting is an effective way to accomplish this. Consequently, we are in full support of **Ohio HB 523**, and its provision to include military family advocacy programs is particularly innovative.

Cross-reporting can **mitigate risks of liability to the State**. Several child protection agencies have been sued for negligence as a result of fatalities to children caused by dangerous animals in families that were under investigation.

Links between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence have been recognized throughout history. Notably, **the child protection movement was initiated by humane societies and SPCAs** in the 1870s (including the Ohio Humane Society) and many animal welfare organizations conducted both child and animal protection for many decades. More recently, **extensive research** has documented significant co-occurrence between child, elder, domestic, and animal abuse. It is now widely recognized that the identification of animal abuse and neglect may serve as a sentinel **"red flag" for violence** against vulnerable human members of the family, and vice versa.

Cross-reporting laws create parallel referral systems between child and adult protection agencies and humane enforcement/animal care and control, based upon evidence that homes with one type of family violence are at higher risk for polyvictimization. Cross-reporting also **maximizes use of limited resources**, engages more diverse stakeholders, and preserves family safety through coordinated, collaborative community response systems.

**Children are at additional risk** for experiencing or committing acts of violence if they commit or witness traumatic animal maltreatment. **Child sexual abusers** target children's pets to ensure silence and compliance.

Similarly, elders and dependent adults may be coerced by abusers who threaten their pets to gain emotional leverage. Elders, in particular, are significantly more likely to experience **self-neglect** and to live in unwholesome environments by **hoarding excessive numbers of animals**.

Cross-reporting allows for **earlier intervention**, particularly in homes that may not otherwise have been identified. Animal abuse and neglect can occur in a family's yard, where neighbors are more likely to see and report their concerns. Consequently, humane enforcement and animal care and control officers often are the first-responders, with a unique opportunity to observe abuse or neglect risk factors affecting other family members. They may also observe **dangerous or excessive numbers of animals** which threaten the well-being of children and dependent adults. Legislating and training child, adult and animal protection agents to cross-report suspected maltreatment that they observe allows counterpart agencies to respond more rapidly.

**At least 32 states have enacted statutes** mandating or permitting such reports without fear of violating confidentiality provisions. In addition, all states have laws that protect child abuse reporters from civil and criminal liability when reports are made in good faith. Cross-reporting laws also **eliminate difficult ethical decisions** and make it easier for caseworkers to say that they are required by law to report.

Child, adult and animal protection professionals **need not be experts** on other forms of suspected maltreatment. Rather, they merely need to have a general suspicion, as in "If you see something say something," and report to the counterpart agency which will then, in turn, determine whether the referral is actionable.

Effective cross-reporting can be implemented through four approaches:

- An inter-agency **Memorandum of Understanding**.
- Inclusion of cross-reporting **protocols** in agency policies.
- Periodic **training** of staffs on basic signs of maltreatment and procedures for timely reporting of suspicions.
- **Legislation** mandating or permitting reporting while simultaneously granting immunity from civil and criminal liability for anyone reporting in good faith.

The National Link Coalition understands that developing legislation and inter-agency relationships, policies and protocols for cross-training and cross-reporting are challenging but not insurmountable concerns. We are prepared to assist in these efforts and work collaboratively to strengthen systems that protect all vulnerable members of America's families.