

TESTIMONY ON OHIO H.B. 33

Presented by Lillian Howard, LSS CHOICES
Before the Ohio Senate Agriculture Committee
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Chairman Hoagland, Vice-Chair Schaffer, Ranking Minority Member O'Brien and distinguished member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, I am Lillian Howard, Director of Clinical and Supportive Services at LSS CHOICES. On behalf of thousands of domestic violence victims and survivors, I ask that your committee support H.B. 33. I supervised a group therapists and supportive staff members who work closely with domestic violence survivors providing individual counseling, case management services, groups, domestic violence education, community and legal advocacy. As domestic violence experts we believe there is a critical need for H.B. 33 that will require animal abuse reporting by veterinarians, social service and certain other professionals; and establishing criminal prohibitions related to such reporting, among other things. Animal abuse is often the first act of violence in a dysfunctional family that leads to further child, adult and/or elder abuse.

Domestic Violence is a pattern of physically and emotionally violent and coercive behaviors that one person uses to exercise power and control over another. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, pets are not immune from domestic violence. Abusers use intimidation, threats, coercion and retaliation to maintain control of survivors, children and pets in the household. The National Link Coalition reports that abusers intimidate the family by targeting pets or other friends/family members who aid them, threaten to harm the pet if the survivor leaves the relationship, or may harm or kill the pet.

Animal abuse in domestic violence household leads to the inter-generational cycle of violence. The abuser threatens or harms an animal, survivors stay in the relationship, children are then exposed to domestic violence and animal abuse, and children become violent or abuse victims. One of the LSS CHOICES Community Advocates provided services to a mother with three children who had left the abuser. The mother purchased two hamsters for the children. Her 5-year-old son played with and intentional hurt the hamsters. One morning he came into the kitchen to show his mother that he had squeezed one of the hamsters to death.

According to the National Link Coalition 63.2% of households with pets consider them to be a family member. Domestic violence abusers isolate, minimize, blame, and use legal, economic, and emotional abuse to control the survivor and other family members in the home. Abusers prevent the pet from seeing the vet, refuse to allow the pet to provide comfort to the children and survivor and often will not purchase food for the pet. If an abuser is harming pets, then the women and children in the household could be and usually are next.

Requiring cross-reporting is not an answer in search of a problem. According to national studies, pet abuse is present in 88 percent of homes referred for physical assault of children; 60 percent of survey participants who witnessed or engaged in animal cruelty also experienced either child maltreatment or domestic violence. In another study, 41 percent of men who had been arrested for domestic violence had committed at least one act of animal cruelty since age 18 compared to a 1.5 percent prevalence rate of men in the general population. And perhaps most significantly,

one of the four primary factors associated with men who become batterers is pet abuse. So, the likelihood exists that animal control, humane law enforcement, veterinarians and social service professionals are going to encounter problems about which they should be informing one another - in an effort not only to address the violence that is happening at the time but also to reduce the likelihood of further violence.

One of the LSS CHOICES therapists shared a story in which the abuser killed a survivor's cat. The abuser often threatened and beat the cat in the relationship. He also made the survivor abuse the cat. For several months she pretended to abuse the cat behind close doors by making noises that she was hitting the cat while she was stroking and comforting the cat. However, one day the abuser succeeded in killing the cat by repeatedly punching the animal in the head. Several years ago, another therapist worked with a young woman whose abuser deliberately burned down their house with at least 4 dogs inside. Although she was able to process through the horrific abuse she suffered at the hands of her abuser, she struggled with the guilt of not being able to save her animals from that burning house. Recently, an LSS Community Advocate assisted a young woman whose abuser beat and murdered her cat. The abuser video recorded the incident and sent it to her. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence reports 25% to 40% of domestic violence victims are unable to escape their abusers because they worry about what will happen to their pets or livestock should they leave.

Cross-reporting is a strategy that can improve the community's response to crimes against both people and animals, and may also help prevent future violence. Cross-reporting presupposes that violence of some kind-domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, animal cruelty-has already occurred or is suspected to have occurred and seeks to engage other responders in better addressing what has already happened as well as staving off or interrupting what could well be coming next.

For the aforementioned reasons, I respectfully urge the Senate Agriculture Committee to pass H.B. 33, which will create another valuable addition to Ohio's laws that are making life better for human and animal victims of domestic violence. Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.

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