



BREAKING the chain

By Linda Tynan

Animal abuse is a horrific part of an ugly cycle. It often stems from domestic violence in the home, as part of a chain of events where one cruel act causes another, then another. The repercussions are linked to those connected to the abuser and the victim; in some cases this includes family pets.

Over a year ago, Alabama citizens were rocked by news of the raid and arrest of the second-largest dog-fighting ring in the United States - right in our own back yard. Recently, U.S. District Judge Keith Watkins handed down the toughest sentence yet in the case - eight years to Donnie Anderson, 50, of Auburn, Ala. The ring spanned over four states; Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and Texas. It is estimated that over 600 dogs were killed as the result of these fights. An additional 451 dogs were rescued, approximately half of which have now been adopted. Dogs of all ages were found living in horrible conditions, chained to cinder blocks and tires, surviving through extreme heat and bitter cold without adequate food and water. The lucky ones were adopted, but many others had to be euthanized due to failing health conditions.

As we hear the unfathomable, we ask ourselves what kind of mind does this. How could anyone treat an animal with such cruelty? The shocking truth is that animal cruelty does not only exist in dog fighting rings where thousands of dollars may be at stake, but it exists in many other forms behind the walls of private residences.

It is well known that there is a definite link between animal cruelty and violent crime. Less than two years ago, we remember watching the Dale County hostage situation unfold while Jimmy Lee Dykes held a five-year-old student hostage in a bunker after shooting and killing 66-year-old bus driver Charles Poland. Dykes

fit the profile of many violent criminals. His past includes a case of animal cruelty for beating his neighbor's dog to death with an iron pipe when it walked onto his property.

Many times, animal abuse is the first step towards violent behavior and it often leads to domestic violence - even murder. Numerous serial killers have admitted to torturing animals in their youth. Officials almost always look for criminals with a background in animal cruelty when looking for perpetrators of violent crimes. It is one of the single greatest predictors of violent behavior in people.

The majority of victims surveyed at abuse shelters admit that their abuser had threatened to harm the family pet or farm animals. Often the abuser will threaten to do harm if they leave or tell anyone about the abuse. Pets may be the pawn in violent home situations - the abusers know if they hurt the pet, they hurt the person emotionally and psychologically. Pets are often abused as a demonstration of the abuser's power and control over the victim. Many victims stay in abusive situations in fear of what might happen to their pets. Sadly, this often means both the person and the pet continue to suffer. If left behind, statistics indicate that the pet will almost certainly be abused, if not killed, in retaliation. Some victims have actually returned home from shelters to protect their pets from abuse after receiving threatening calls, texts or emails from their abusers.

Domestic violence groups have brought to light the link between animal cruelty and domestic violence from the documentation of victims in their shelters, primarily related to women and children. Pet-abuse.com refers to a study that states in 88 percent of families where various forms of child abuse had taken place, animal abuse had also occurred. Two-thirds of the abuse was by the father figure, but surprisingly



“A veterinarian is obligated to report to the proper authorities any grossly inhumane treatment to animals of which he or she has direct knowledge.”

Alabama Veterinary Practice Act

one-third of the abusers were children. It is suggested that this is a manifestation of their own victimization; they may be repeating what they have learned from their parents. Their anger is directed at something weaker than they are, and research indicates that children from homes with domestic violence are much more likely to abuse animals.

People are now becoming more mindful of the connection between animal abuse and domestic violence. Legislation to allow abuse victims to bring their pets with them to shelters is now being discussed in some states and is already in place in others. New York, Maine and Vermont now include pets in restraining orders and some cities allow pets to be boarded at the local animal control free of charge for a set period of time until further arrangements can be made. When police are called to a location about a domestic violence case, they also recover the pets in the home and deliver them to animal control for boarding.

A new trend of shelter provisions for pets of domestic violence is also popping up across the country. While the connection between domestic violence and animal abuse is not new, people are finally realizing that in order to help the human victims, they must also

offer help to their pets. This may, in turn, prevent victims from further abuse. Knowing there is a safe place for their pets may also encourage them to make the move to get out of an abusive situation. Organizations like Red Rover offer financial assistance through grants for victims and their pets. They have set up an online directory of pet support programs at safeplaceforpets.org for victims of domestic violence.



It is our nature to want to help people and pets, but sometimes it may seem borderline as to whether or not we should get involved. It is important to remember that when you notice signs of animal abuse, your action could save the life of the animal and even the life of the pet owner. Odd behavior, unusual wounds or neglect in general may be telling the story of abuse in the home. Multiple head wounds, untreated injuries, untreated medical conditions or malnourishment indicate abuse. It is the responsibility of any citizen to report animal abuse, but as veterinarians, it is a professional duty. You are in a unique position to see more pets through your practices and are educated on the tell-tale signs of abuse others may not recognize. If you have the least bit of suspicion, take an extra moment, ask another question, take the extra step that might make a difference in the life of an animal - or a human!

Relevant statistics on domestic violence and animal abuse:

- 52 percent of victims in shelters leave their pets with their batterers (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence)
- Up to 65 percent of domestic violence victims are unable to escape their abusers because they are concerned about what will happen to their pets when they leave (Carlisle-Frank, Frank and Nielsen, 2004)
- In a study of families with a history of animal neglect, 83 percent were identified by experts as having children at risk of abuse or neglect (Washington Humane Society)
- Over 30 percent of women killed are murdered by their boyfriends or husbands
- 71 percent of pet-owning women entering women's shelters reported that their batterer had injured, maimed, killed or threatened family pets for revenge or to psychologically control victims; 32 percent reported their children had hurt or killed animals (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence)