

The National Link Coalition: The Veterinarian's Role in Breaking the Chain of Family and Community Violence

Provided to One Health Initiative website / team February 18, 2016:

By PHIL ARKOW

Coordinator, National Link Coalition
37 Hillside Road, Stratford, NJ 08084
856-627-5118

arkowpets@snip.net - www.NationalLinkCoalition.org

If one of the pediatrician's responsibilities is to prevent child abuse, shouldn't the veterinarian's responsibilities include preventing animal abuse?

That's a One Health question which helped fuel the start of the National Link Coalition in 2008 as a way to improve well-being by transcending professional and species boundaries. Subsequent gains have been impressive and are effecting more comprehensive solutions to health issues affecting humans and other species.

The Coalition came about through impetus from the animal welfare community, in response to growing scientific evidence from the social sciences, criminology and behavioral health fields, about the impact of animal cruelty on interpersonal aggression and other criminal behaviors. Like other One Health proponents, we believe that human and animal interests are inextricably intertwined, and that animal welfare is also a human well-being issue. We promote a collaborative approach between humane and human services to ensure a more comprehensive approach to breaking the cycles of violence and protecting all vulnerable members of society.

The National Link Coalition's vision is:

The Link between violence against humans and violence against animals is widely known and understood. We believe that through the recognition and integration of this understanding into policies and practices nationwide, humans and animals will be measurably safer.

With 99% of Americans considering pets to be significant companions and members of the family, it is apparent that a "siloe" approach in which veterinary medicine, animal welfare, animal control, and animal cruelty prevention are segregated from their human health, social services and law enforcement counterparts is no longer appropriate.

Research continually demonstrates that acts of animal abuse serve as indicators, and frequently as predictors, of family dysfunction, behavioral health problems, and interpersonal violence. We believe that a synergistic approach, on the local, national and global levels, can be more effective in bridging gaps and addressing violence prevention holistically. Our trainings to veterinarians and human health professionals cite the One Health concept as a rationale to recognize the emotional attachments clients and patients may have towards pets and to respond to animal cruelty, child abuse, domestic violence and elder abuse.

We see animal abuse as also being a public health issue. We focus on what we call “the dark side” of the human-animal bond: the broken bonds that emerge from negative interactions between the species and how these events frequently manifest in interpersonal violence. We also work with “the good side” of the human-animal bond, using animal-assisted therapy to treat the perpetrators and victims of animal abuse.

This One Health approach has resulted in notable changes over the past few years:

- The American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Animal Hospital Association have amended their policies and the veterinary oath to redefine the veterinarian's role as including the protection of animal welfare and the prevention animal suffering, and to support the mandatory reporting of animal abuse by practitioners.
- Seventeen American states now mandate veterinarians to report suspected animal abuse; an additional 18 additional states permit such reporting, all with immunity from civil and criminal liability. An additional two states require veterinarians to report suspected child abuse and one state mandates their reporting of elder abuse. (In 18 states, all citizens are mandated to report suspected child abuse. Trainings to veterinary personnel in these states are now introducing them to this responsibility of which they were previously unaware.)
- Government funding in Scotland is training veterinarians to recognize and respond to domestic violence: veterinarians were identified with dentists and hairdressers as the three professions most likely to encounter battered women.
- The New Zealand Veterinary Association has defined veterinary medicine as a unique “three-dimensional profession” charged with protecting animals, people and the environment. NZVA has signed on to a government initiative to prevent family violence.
- Animal cruelty's status as a public health issue was confirmed in a 2013 research study that reported that 21.1% of all dog bite fatalities in the U.S. involved dogs that had been victims of abuse.
- A survey by the Manitoba Veterinary Medical Association in Canada reported that the first place the public goes to report animal abuse is to their veterinarian, rather than to the police or humane society. An Australian study reported that the public already believes veterinarians are mandated to report suspected animal abuse even though they are not so required.
- Veterinary associations in the U.S., U.K. and New Zealand have published guidances and toolkits to assist veterinarians in the clinical and diagnostic recognition of animal abuse and their response to clients and appropriate authorities.
- The field of veterinary forensics has emerged as a specialty to provide the clinical evidence needed for successful cruelty prosecutions, similar to forensic procedures long in place in human pathology.
- In 2016 the FBI is adding four types of animal cruelty – simple/gross neglect, physical abuse and torture, organized abuse (animal fighting), and animal sexual abuse (bestiality) – to its National Incident-Based Reporting System. This is the first time that animal cruelty will have been included on reporting forms used by 18,000 law enforcement agencies and will allow, for the first time, the tracking of animal abuse cases and linking them to other crimes.

The National Link Coalition offers extensive resources, a Bibliography with over 1,100 references, and a speakers' bureau with trainings targeted to human and veterinary medicine, law enforcement, social work, the criminal justice system, child welfare, domestic violence, adult protective services, and many other disciplines. Our monthly electronic bulletin, *The LINK-Letter*, is distributed to 2,850 readers in 50 states and 44 countries. Local human-animal coalitions against violence are emerging in communities across the U.S., Europe and Australasia.

For additional information, or to subscribe to the free *LINK-Letter*, please visit www.NationalLinkCoalition.org or contact coordinator **Phil Arkow** at arkowpets@snip.net.