

# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**Women often stay in an abusive relationship because an animal is used as a hostage. Threats and violence to animals can be a very effective control strategy when refuges don't provide for them.**

## Background

Domestic and family violence is a pattern of behaviour intending to cause fear or harm in order to control another member of the household. Controlling behaviours may include physical violence, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, social abuse, financial abuse, psychological abuse, damage to property and harm to loved ones. It is estimated that companion animals are present in 70% of domestic violence cases in Australia<sup>1</sup>, with substantial evidence indicating a strong connection between animal abuse and domestic violence<sup>2</sup>. Studies indicate that in up to 71% of domestic violence situations<sup>3</sup> women with companion animals reported threatened or actual animal abuse. Perpetrators of domestic and family violence often threaten, hurt or kill family companion animals as a means of coercing and controlling female partners<sup>4</sup>. Children in violent homes may also witness and commit animal abuse themselves, possibly causing prolonged psychological problems and continuing a cycle of animal abuse<sup>5</sup>. Experts recommend early clinical interventions by professionals to mitigate the potential of this occurring. It also needs to be acknowledged that there are long-lasting impacts on animals<sup>6</sup> who have both witnessed or experienced domestic violence, with traumatic effects evident months after the abuse, and well beyond their human companions having left the violent home.

## Staying to protect their companion animals

Up to 48% of women<sup>7</sup> remain in violent homes if no provisions can be made for their companion animals for fear of their safety. This is exacerbated by the fact that most refuges or

crisis accommodation options will not house companion animals. Research by veterinary pathologist Dr Lydia Tong found that when leaving with their animals, 92% of women were turned away from refuges, 70% were turned away from government rentals and 60% from private rentals. In 33% of cases<sup>8</sup>, family and friends also turned them away. The Animal Justice Party (AJP) seeks to remove these barriers for victims seeking refuge. Many women are also unaware of animal accommodation services for people fleeing domestic violence situations and are often not comfortable confiding in their vets or seeking help from animal shelters<sup>9</sup>. Others are not willing to separate from their companion animals due to the emotional stability, security and companionships they provide for them and their children<sup>10</sup>. Australia needs options for victims of domestic violence to seek refuge with their companion animals.

## National registries and strengthening legislation

Much of the Australian community and law enforcement agents welcome registries<sup>11</sup>, such as a sex offender registry, as a means of not only providing access to information that could help individuals to avoid harm, but to also make public the values and expectations of society. A national domestic violence and animal abuse registry may play several roles, such as aiding animal shelters in running background checks on potential adopters, for individuals to make informed choices about potential new connections and as a form of public education, starting or continuing public discussion around what behaviours are unacceptable in our society. It must, however, be remembered that registries may not deter of-

<sup>1</sup><https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/link-between-domestic-violence-and-pets/10263328>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.abc.net.au/news/-%20-%20/what-%20happens-%20to-%20pets-%20in-%20domestic-%20violence-%20situations/>

<sup>3</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237067781\\_Volant\\_A\\_Johnson\\_J\\_Gullone\\_E\\_Coleman\\_G\\_2008\\_The\\_relationship\\_between\\_family\\_violence\\_and\\_animal\\_abuse\\_Journal\\_of\\_Interpersonal\\_Violence\\_23\\_1277-1295](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237067781_Volant_A_Johnson_J_Gullone_E_Coleman_G_2008_The_relationship_between_family_violence_and_animal_abuse_Journal_of_Interpersonal_Violence_23_1277-1295)

<sup>4</sup><https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10437797.2003.10779134>

<sup>5</sup>[https://kb.rspca.org.au/is-there-a-link-between-domestic-violence-and-animal-abuse\\_695.html](https://kb.rspca.org.au/is-there-a-link-between-domestic-violence-and-animal-abuse_695.html)

<sup>6</sup><https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1335&context=asj>

<sup>7</sup>[https://groups.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/domestic\\_violence\\_and\\_animal\\_abuse.pdf](https://groups.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/domestic_violence_and_animal_abuse.pdf)

<sup>8</sup><https://www.theaustralian.com.%20au/life/pet-abuse-and-domestic-violence/news-story/%20eaeceaaaca>

<sup>9</sup><https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1751-0813.2011.00843.x>

<sup>10</sup>[https://kb.rspca.org.au/is-there-a-link-between-domestic-violence-and-animal-abuse\\_695.html](https://kb.rspca.org.au/is-there-a-link-between-domestic-violence-and-animal-abuse_695.html)

<sup>11</sup><https://theconversation.com/sex-offender-registers-dont-mean-we-can-assume-children-are-safe-39188>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-22/barns-its-time-to-rethink-sex-offender-registers/5832176>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.aspc.org/about-us/aspc-policy-and-position-statements/position-statement-animal-abuser-registries>



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fenders<sup>12</sup>, and so we must avoid creating a false sense of security. Specific to animal abuse registries, there are several words of caution<sup>13</sup>, including their limited reach and utilisation, their limited scope and inability to provide true protection, their inability to remove all access to companion animals, the extreme likelihood of their inability to reduce animal abuse, and the expense of implementation and maintenance. As such, registries are useful when taken as part of a suite of approaches to tackling domestic and family violence. It is also important to create and implement stronger legislation against violence, including appropriate jail time and prevention of owning or caring for animals for offenders, while also including appropriate counselling<sup>14</sup>. When taken together, these strategies may provide better outcomes for human and non-human victims of domestic violence animals.

## Wider reform; changing family law

Animals are also notably absent<sup>15</sup> in government and community sector policies aimed at tackling domestic and family violence. The family law courts also need reform as “current legislation treats family [companions] and other animals as property, to be divided as part of a just and equitable property settlement between the parties . . .”<sup>16</sup>. This means that matters of animals’ well-being are not considered in decisions made about their future. These limitations can lead to companion animals remaining in the custody (or “ownership”) of a violent perpetrator, placing them at risk of further harm. The AJP advocates for the custody of animals to be awarded to the party or parties who will best look after their wellbeing. We believe that this will help victims leave violent homes together with their loved ones.

## Policy

The Animal Justice Party opposes violence in all forms. Violence towards adults, children or animals is never acceptable.

We will advocate for holistic approaches to overcome the barriers for victims of domestic violence seeking refuge and will promote coordinated inter-agency approaches to give victims the justice they deserve. Meaningful change will require us to abolish the property status of animals and re-categorise companion animals as dependents (see AJP’s Companion Animal Policy).

## Key Objectives

1. Increase the coverage of domestic and family violence refuges, especially those that also shelter dependent children and animals, and provide secure funding.
2. Strengthen legislation relating to animal cruelty and ensure consistent and adequate sentencing and rehabilitation for perpetrators of violence (see our Animal Law policy).
3. Facilitate information sharing, collaboration and cross-training between police, other government departments, veterinarians and the Independent Animal Protection Agency to stamp out all forms of violence (see our Animal Law policy).
4. Create a single national register for convicted perpetrators of domestic and family violence and animal cruelty to forewarn potential victims and convey societal values of non-violence.
5. Reform the family law system to consider the animal’s wellbeing during divorce proceedings and make it easier for victims to amend animal registration and microchipping details without alerting the perpetrator as to their whereabouts.
6. Introduce compulsory reporting mechanisms for veterinarians who reasonably suspect animal abuse or domestic and family violence to be occurring.
7. Include age-appropriate lessons for school children to identify and respond to animal abuse and domestic and family violence situations. (see our education policy)

<sup>14</sup>[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/animalia/wp/2016/09/13/animal-abusers-are-being-registered-like-sex-offenders-in-these-jurisdictions/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.5d17278d2422](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/animalia/wp/2016/09/13/animal-abusers-are-being-registered-like-sex-offenders-in-these-jurisdictions/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.5d17278d2422)

<sup>15</sup><https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol7/iss1/2/>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/link-between-domestic-violence-and-pets/10263328>



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