

ON THE POSITIVE SIDE

Local family violence and animal abuse focus

By Frank Bryce

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On May 9, an open forum meeting was conducted in the Doña Ana County commissioners' chambers.

This was a monthly town hall meeting by Mark D'Antonio, district attorney for the Third Judicial District of New Mexico. The district attorney and his staff were present to address concerns, hear ideas and meet the public. This session covered a wide range of topics and this meeting included a declaration by the district attorney that his office was actively pursuing a family violence intervention and prevention program. This announcement was welcomed by the representative of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico attending the meeting. Family violence is often preceded by animal abuse, cruelty and neglect. The District Attorney's Office effort is greeted as a very positive step in recognizing and addressing family violence potential through early identification of animal abuse, cruelty and neglect.

In the National Link Coalition's The LINK Letter, Vol. 6., No. 5, May, 2013, how animal abuse and other family violence are linked is discussed.

The article states 'In domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse cases, actual or threatened animal abuse can be a way for the abuser to silence victims about the incident or to prevent them from leaving a violent relationship.

Abusers kill, hurt or threaten animals to exert power over the human victims and to show them what could happen to them. Killing a family pet can eliminate a source of comfort and support for the human victim. Sometimes the victims themselves abuse animals, either to protect the animal from worse harm or to displace their hostility towards their abuser.' The lack of financial resources, transportation, or physical capability results in either animals suffering, or the animals cared for, but the person neglects his or her own well-being. Impressionable children who witness or perpetrate acts of animal cruelty can suffer lifelong and devastating impacts.

The article further states 'Animal abuse and family violence are usually perceived and treated as separate issues, handled independently by animal care and control or human services agencies that until recently have had little incentive to work together. Professionals in all these fields are not surprised when they learn that often they are dealing with the same families, the same perpetrators, and the same overarching problems....

Animal maltreatment is often 'the tip of the iceberg' and the first warning sign of an individual or family in trouble.

Knowing that these forms of family violence are linked, it is important that the agencies involved understand their role in communicating, collaborating, and reporting with each other.

'Violence towards humans or animals can take the form of physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect.

While most animal cruelty investigations involve unintentional neglect, many uncover intentional neglect and abuse. All cases have the potential to be connected to other forms of violence or dysfunction in the home, and animal control officers and humane law investigators are often 'first responders' and the first point of contact for a family in need of assistance.' The District Attorney's office said that 'All our families are at risk, so we all have to be involved in keeping them safe.' This program to intervene and prevent family violence will require the community's help to report animal abuse, cruelty and neglect as an important aspect of this effort. To get involved, see the coalition's website at <http://nationallinkcoalition.org/>.

Frank Bryce is president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico. Interested guest authors can contact HSSNM at 575-523-8020.