

Animals and their families: The hidden victims of domestic violence

Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) releases findings today from its survey of the domestic violence sector, which found 42% of workers stating victims they supported had delayed leaving a perpetrator for more than a year due to barriers in accessing support related to their animals. This is due to a lack of animal-friendly emergency, crisis, medium and long-term housing and the victim's lack of funds to pay for boarding for animals.

The DVNSW survey was conducted in July 2020 with 100 domestic and family violence workers across NSW. It found 55% of workers have supported victims who disclosed a perpetrator killed an animal or multiple animals.

"During our relationship, my ex-wife drowned our guinea pig and dog because we loved them. She killed my son's rabbit when he was 8 years old" says Jayke Burgess, a survivor of domestic violence.

Perpetrators use many types of domestic and family violence against animals, including hitting, kicking, burning, drowning, strangulation, neglect and verbal and emotional abuse. Perpetrators use this violence to control victims and prevent them from leaving, and 48% of workers stated that victims they supported had delayed leaving a perpetrator by more than a year due to fear or threat of an animal being harmed.

"My brother threatened to kill my birds as a form of coercive control to make me do what he wanted and to keep the secret of his abuse," said Talie Star, who experienced family violence as a child. "On one occasion [he] took my budgie out of the cage and snapped its neck."

85% of workers also stated that victims fear separation from the animals, and some workers noted animals can prevent suicide and self-harm. "Animals were my lifeline when I was growing up... They were the ones I could talk to whenever I needed to and were a soft and loving place in a violent and dangerous family," shared Talie.

Advocacy and Prevention Manager at Domestic Violence NSW Monique Dam emphasised: "Animals and people experiencing violence should be supported to stay together wherever possible, because this helps everyone to heal and recover and separation can be re-traumatising."

DVNSW welcomes the NSW Government's announcement of funding to allow animals to be accommodated in refuges or animal shelters, and its current review of law and policy in this area. DVNSW's submission to the review calls for more supports for animals and people experiencing domestic and family violence to ensure their safety and wellbeing, and options for people in rural and regional areas with larger animals like horses.

"Government and the domestic violence and animal welfare sectors need to work together to understand the violence perpetrated against animals and people and how to improve their safety," stated Dam.

DVNSW urgently calls for changes to be made to domestic violence laws to better protect animals from perpetrators, and highlights the need to make renting and housing accessible to people with animals experiencing violence so they can leave a violent perpetrator without facing homelessness.

"The need for urgent action is even greater due to the COVID-19 crisis, as 39% of workers stated their clients with animals have experienced increased sexual, domestic or family violence during this time," says Dam.

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Domestic Violence NSW is the peak body for specialist domestic and family violence services in NSW. DVNSW provides a representative and advocacy function for specialist services and the women, families and communities they support. Their mission is to eliminate domestic and family violence through leadership in policy, advocacy, partnerships and the promotion of best practice.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence help can be found via:

- **1800RESPECT** 1800 737 732 which offers national counselling, information and support
- **NSW Domestic Violence Line** 1800 65 64 63 which offers counselling, information and support
- **Men's Referral Service** 1300 766 491 for men, or friends and family of men using violence