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## Things to consider for DV Practice

Companion animals provide emotional support, unconditional love, and stability for many victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. This bond can be exploited by perpetrators, who may inflict or threaten harm to animals as a strategy to intimidate, coerce or control human victim-survivors. Many pets are used to exert control over people (“you leave and you won’t see those animals again”).

Perpetrators use animals to intimidate, retaliate against, and manipulate victims during the relationship and after separation. Abuse or threats of abuse have particular impacts if the victim has a disability or mental illness and the animal is a service or assistance animal such as a guide dog.

In one Victorian study, 52.9% of women who experienced domestic violence reported a violent partner had hurt or killed one of their pets. In a US study 71% of women seeking refuge from abusive relationships reported their partner had threatened, harmed or killed at least one of their pets.

There are new laws in NSW that change the definition of ‘intimidation’ to indicate clearly that harm to, or harm threatened to, animals is a form of intimidation. The changes to the law also ensures that the protection of animals will be a standard condition in all ADVOs.

## The Human-animal bond

- Approximately 61% of Australian households share their lives with a companion animal. This equates to about 29 million animals, with dogs being the most common companion animal.
- Many people regard animals as treasured members of their family.
- Animals can be a source of comfort, joy, security and stability for adults and children. For adults and children who experience domestic and family violence and abuse, animals can be a vital source of support, comfort and unconditional love. For example, animals can act in the role of ‘comforter’ after their human family members have been subjected to abuse.
- The bond between a client and her companion animal can be of crucial importance to the client’s wellbeing both during the abuse and post-abuse. A client’s bond with her animal may be the only positive relationship present in her life. In some cases, victim-survivors talk about their animals as being “life-savers” due to the emotional support they offer.





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- Research shows that, for some adults and children, having a bond with a companion animal can help them recover from domestic violence and abuse.
- Positive human-animal relations are integral to both humans and animals who are trying to recover from domestic violence and abuse.

## Children and young people

- A family member who abuses a much-loved animal (or forces a child to carry out the abuse) inflicts psychological harm on a child.
- When a family member harms an animal, or when a child is separated from a much-loved animal, the emotional and psychological impacts of domestic violence and abuse are compounded for the child.
- Homeless young people with animals report less depression and loneliness than young people who do not have animals in their care. Animals offer companionship and make young people feel loved, mitigating the effects of depression and loneliness.
- When children observe a family member using violence against an animal, animal abuse can become normalised. If a child is desensitised to animal abuse, they may use violence against animals, thus continuing the cycle of animal abuse in their family.
- Children may be forced by that person to harm an animal by a family member uses violence and abuse against people and animals. A person who uses violence in the home may threaten violence against a child in order to coerce the child to inflict harm on an animal.

## LGBTIQ communities

- Rates of companion animal 'ownership' tend to be higher in LGBTIQ communities (one US study showed that 71% of LGBTIQ people shared their lives with a companion animal compared to 63% of non-LGBTIQ people).
- A 2019 study on violence against LGBTIQ people and their companion animals found that animal companionship can help mitigate LGBTIQ people's experiences of discrimination and abuse; therefore, contributing to improved health and wellbeing.

## What is an animal inclusive service?

In the context of service provision, we must move beyond the idea that acknowledging animal abuse perpetrated by a family member is only important because it serves as a signifier of possible abuse and violence towards women and children in the home. Rather, we must recognise that animals are sentient beings who are victims in their own right, deserving of protection from physical and emotional abuse. This approach validates the love and care that clients have for their animals and legitimises the human-animal bond.





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Promoting the safety of animals is critical not only for the wellbeing of animals but also for the protection of the people who care about them. Ignoring animals in service provision might hinder the worker's ability to help clients.

Service providers are more likely to establish rapport with clients if they take an interest in the human *and* animal relationships that clients report as being important to them.

There are numerous tasks that service providers can undertake, depending on the nature of their service, to promote an animal-inclusive approach.

These include:

- animal-inclusive training for staff and volunteers
- implementation of animal-inclusive policies
- including questions about animals during the intake process
- animal-friendly promotional materials, including brochures, website content and social media posts
- liaising directly with animal foster carers, animal control officers, police and/or the RSPCA to assist clients' animals
- supporting clients to access veterinary care for their animals, including desexing
- supporting clients to access council registration and microchipping
- teaching employees and residents how to interact—or avoid interacting—with animals who are residing in emergency accommodation facilities such as refuges
- applying for grants that fund animal-inclusive upgrades and service provision
- partnering with researchers to (further) examine the benefits and challenges of animal-inclusive service design.

## Benefits of an animal inclusive service

- Service providers who incorporate companion animals in service delivery (for example, an animal-inclusive intake process) and in promotional materials (for example, photos of animals in brochures and on websites) will be more accessible and relevant to women who are experiencing abuse and who have animals in their care.
- If we disregard the important role that animals play in family life, we may inadvertently neglect the potential for animals to help their human family members. For example, in relation to LGBTIQ people's experiences, research found that some victim-survivors will seek help when the abuse against their animals escalates rather than when it escalates for themselves.





- The identification of at-risk animals and people by service providers (for example, vets, animal welfare services, police, caseworkers, counsellors, etc.) provides an opportunity to effectively address the detrimental consequences of animal abuse and domestic violence on both people and animals.

## Rationale for an animal-inclusive intake process

An intake process for animals recognises that animals are victims of domestic and family violence (DFV) and acknowledges that their safety is important (for them, and for their human family). It acknowledges that DFV impacts the whole family, including animals.

An intake process that includes animals ensures that DFV workers ask the question of clients: ***do you currently have animals in your care?*** It is important that this information is collected at the earliest opportunity to ensure that appropriate referrals are made for the woman and her family. Asking this question also demonstrates to the client that the service recognises the human-animal bond and the worth that families place on their relationship with their animal family members. An animal-inclusive intake process demonstrates to a client that her connection to, and affection for, an animal will not be disregarded or ridiculed.

### Background

In 2015, the NSW Government began the rollout of Safer Pathway. A key feature of Safer Pathway was the introduction of a common risk assessment tool called the Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT).

One of the 25 questions is: ***Has the Person Of Interest threatened to harm or actually harmed your pets?*** There is an option of ticking 'yes' or 'no', and space to include a comment. The inclusion of this question is in recognition of the fact that animal abuse is an indicator of serious abuse against people.

For many clients, this may be the only time that they are asked a question about animals in their care.

In NSW, animals are not regarded as victims of domestic and family violence *in their own right*. Their sentience is not recognised and their vulnerability is exacerbated because they have no rights as independent victims of domestic and family violence.

Animals are commonly viewed as either someone's 'property' or as a signifier of violence towards people.

An animal-inclusive intake process seeks to rectify this approach by treating animals as members of the client's family unit.

## Creating an animal safety assessment form

If a client says she has animals in her care, consider completing an animal risk assessment.





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The form could list:

- The name, age, sex and breed of each animal.
- If it is desexed, vaccinated, microchipped, or the PIC number.
- The name of the registered owner and any other information that might be relevant, such as that it is a breed champion or very valuable, that it has special medical or physical needs or that it is a service animal.

The form could include questions such as:

- Has the animal/s experienced physical or verbal abuse?
- Has the perpetrator made threats against the animal/s? Including threats to harm, withhold or take the animal/s?
- Does the perpetrator neglect the animal or deny care for the animal/s?
- Has the animal/s intervened directly in the violence?
- Have you noticed any behavioural changes in the animal/s? (aggression around food or overly protective?)
- Does the animal have any physical injuries or impairments?

As the killing of a family pet is considered an indicator of high risk, consider asking if there have been other animals in the client's care that have died or unexpectedly gone missing. Ask about the circumstances surrounding the death or disappearance.

Studies show that children subjected to DFVA may also deliberately injure animals, so ask if she has any concerns about the behaviour of any of her children towards animals.

If possible, widen out your enquiries to include wildlife, such as hunting kangaroos with bows and arrows, cruelty towards or the killing of insects, reptiles or native birds or the deliberate harming of animals that belong to a neighbour.

It is also useful to ask about livestock and farmed animals, including if they are a source of income for the person experiencing abuse and violence.

## Finding a home for a family with animals

### Rehoming with the animals

- Is the new accommodation suitable for the animals? (Big enough, secure enough)
- For emergency and temporary accommodation, is there an animal-inclusive refuge or pet-friendly motel?
- For transitional housing or private rental, are animals permitted?





## Rehoming the animals separate to the family

If the animals cannot be rehomed with the client there are a number of options.

- Can a friend or family member take care of the animals on a temporary basis?
- Does the client need to access an animal emergency foster care program, such as RSPCA's Community Domestic Violence Program or an Animal Rights and Rescue Group?
- Does the local council offer subsidised kennel services for women and children impacted by DFVA?
- Is there a local formal or informal foster care network (where animals live in the homes of volunteer carers until they can be reunited with their human families)?
- Is there a local animal rescue group who can accommodate the animal (either in a kennel facility or carer's home) until the client secures housing?

Is a private kennel an affordable and feasible option? Is there a fee-subsidy option for women who have experienced DFVA? (Note that private kennels usually require evidence that an animal's vaccination schedule is up to date, such as a vaccination certificate).

For larger animals:

- Are there local and affordable options for the agistment of large animals, such as horses? It is important to consider that they could be recognised by someone known to the family, leading to the identification of the client's new residence.

Warm referrals to services such as Staying Home Leaving Violence (for case management, household security audit, security and safety upgrades) and Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service (for information and advocacy regarding AVOs) may be appropriate.

## Working together with animal support agencies

When working with animal support agencies, it's important to recognise that:

- they are not usually trained in DFVA
- they have limited resources, and;
- are often staffed by volunteers.

Communication between DFVA services and animal agencies must be a two-way street. Too often animal agencies are asked to assist but given little or no information or assistance. It is important to build a rapport with animal agencies and keep the lines of communication open. In this way:

- the animal agency is informed of the animal's history
- they can better meet the animal's needs





- they can take this history into account when assessing the animal's behaviour
- this knowledge may impact fostering or rehoming options.

Remember that animal service staff may need support from human agencies. This might be in the form of debriefing, an information exchange about the level of risk for foster carers, or material aid such as money to cover transport costs, feed or vet bills.

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