Executive Summary

National Survey on Domestic Violence and Pets: Breaking Barriers to Safety and Healing

The Urban Resource Institute (URI) and the National Domestic Violence Hotline (The Hotline) announce the results of the largest nationwide survey in the United States of domestic violence survivors focused on the impact of pets on survivors’ ability to leave a dangerous situation. The findings are clear: fear for the welfare of pets is a barrier that keeps survivors from leaving abusive situations to find safety and healing. Additionally, once in a safe location, separation from a beloved pet creates an additional trauma.

URI, a pioneer in providing safety and services for domestic violence survivors and their pets, partnered with The Hotline to conduct a 13-question survey to gather the most extensive and comprehensive national data available on how the consideration of pets affects domestic violence victims’ options and decision-making. The survey interviewed nearly 2,500 individuals across the United States who called, texted, or chatted online with The Hotline for support. The survey focused on how survivors felt about pets in relation to their experiences of abuse, their considerations when seeking safety for themselves and their pets, and their awareness of resources for survivors with pets needing to escape an abusive situation.

This is the first time The Hotline has conducted a survey about the impact of pets, and the survey confirms and expands upon previous findings that had only touched the surface of the complex role pets play in domestic violence survivors’ experience and decision-making before they have secured safe shelter. The results indicate and reinforce that pets are a crucial component of a survivor’s family unit that should be kept safe and together, and failing to provide pet accommodations and services inhibits many survivors from seeking shelter. The Hotline/URI survey also reveals that despite a growing number of domestic violence shelters that accommodate pets (either on site or in partner animal services), survivors’ awareness of these programs remains low, creating additional risk to both people and animals impacted by domestic violence. Among the less than 10% of domestic violence shelters that accommodate pets are the shelters of the URI People and Animals Living Safely (PALS) program, which provides co-living and services for people with their pets.

Key findings include:

- 97% of respondents said that keeping their pets with them is an important factor in deciding whether or not to seek shelter.
- 50% of respondents would not consider shelter for themselves if they could not take their pets with them.
- 48% were worried that the abuser would harm or kill the pets.
- 37% reported that the abuser had already threatened to harm or kill pets; and 29% said pets had already been harmed or killed.
- 76% of respondents reported noticeable changes in their pets’ behavior as a result of abuse.
- 72% of respondents were not aware that some domestic violence shelters accept pets. (Currently, only about 250 shelters in the U.S. are pet-friendly and many others have foster care arrangements for pets.)

The key takeaways from the survey:

- This is the first study of its kind to interview survivors in a moment of outreach and decision-making, in contrast to studies of survivors already settled in a shelter and removed from their abusive environment. The results confirmed and expanded upon numerous such studies of survivors in shelter who similarly reported harm and threats to their pets had kept them from leaving an abusive situation.
- Offering shelter and services to animals empowers human survivors to seek safety.
- There is a need to raise awareness among domestic violence victims about the availability of resources that can remove a major barrier to their safety.
- There is a critical need for more shelter options that accommodate pets.
- More research and evaluation are needed of programs addressing the intersection of domestic violence and pets.
These new findings:

- Provide additional and newer data that will encourage community domestic violence and animal welfare agencies to create partnerships to address shared goals.
- Give corporate supporters, philanthropic funders, legislators, stakeholders, and service providers additional insight into the scope of the link between domestic violence and pets. This includes the need for more public policy, programs, and financial support for domestic violence shelters to establish pet-friendly facilities and programs. This support includes initial capital and ongoing operational needs, such as hiring trauma-informed staffing familiar with the needs of pets and pet owners, maintaining prevention and intervention services, and obtaining pet supplies and veterinary care.
- Reinforce the need for state and national domestic violence crisis hotlines’ personnel to consistently include the welfare, status, and housing needs of survivors’ pets in their intake. Such information removes a key barrier to victims escaping and enables hotline staff to refer survivors to appropriate shelters that are either pet-friendly or have collaborative programs with community animal organizations. Crisis line staff should also be trained on the highly significant bond between survivors and their pets, especially in moments of crisis, and how keeping the entire family together can enhance healing and recovery.
- Demonstrate the ongoing need for more pet-friendly domestic violence shelters. URI is responding by preparing to launch a nationwide outreach of a Community Response Model of pet housing facilities and foster-care programs for domestic violence shelters that are scalable and adaptable to communities’ varying sizes, resources, and needs.

Background on Pets and Crisis

Decades of research confirm that pets are a significant factor in emergency situations including violence, natural disaster, and other crises. The threat or actual harm of pets is a form of emotional control that serves as a barrier that often prevents survivors of domestic violence from leaving their abusive partners. The emotional attachment that adults and children have for their pets makes the animals “soft targets” that abusive partners may use as point of vulnerability that can coerce and control family members and exert their power over victims. Pets are also instrumental to the emotional support, psychological health, and recovery of people in crisis once they have found safety.