

Responses to the Problem of Animal Cruelty

Your analysis of your local problem should give you a better understanding of the factors contributing to it. Once you have analyzed your local problem and established a baseline for measuring effectiveness, consider possible responses to address the problem.

The following response strategies provide a foundation of ideas for addressing your particular animal cruelty problem. These strategies are drawn from a variety of research studies and police reports. Several strategies may apply to your community's problem.

It is critical that you tailor responses to local circumstances and that you can justify each response based on reliable analysis. In most cases, an effective strategy will involve implementing several different responses. Law enforcement responses alone are seldom effective in reducing or solving the problem.

Do not limit yourself to considering what the police can do: carefully consider whether others in your community share responsibility for the problem and can help the police better respond to it. The responsibility of responding, in some cases, may need to be shifted toward those capable of implementing more effective responses. For more detailed information on shifting and sharing responsibility, see Response Guide No. 3, *Shifting and Sharing Responsibility for Public Safety Problems*.

For further information on managing the implementation of response strategies, see Problem-Solving Tools Guide No. 7, *Implementing Responses to Problems*.

General Considerations for an Effective Response Strategy

Developing standardized data-reporting protocols. Reliable estimates of the prevalence of animal cruelty are not available at national, state, or local levels. Not only does the lack of data impede the ability to target prevention, education, and rescue efforts, but it also prevents further analysis of the relationship between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence. Centralized databases for reports of animal abuse and neglect should include information on offenders, victims, the nature of the offense, and the time and place where the abuse occurred. A simple design, standardized definitions, and data quality-control efforts are essential. Researchers suggest that we can learn from child abuse data-reporting protocols developed and implemented over the past few decades.⁴¹ Most importantly, those charged with the duty to report and enter data must

be educated about the value of statistical data and the importance of their individual contributions.

Building a coalition among organizations focused on violence prevention. Coalitions harness the expertise, resources, leverage, and access of a diverse group of stakeholders to catalyze changes that members are unable to accomplish alone. Police, animal control officers, animal welfare organizations, social service workers, veterinarians, housing authorities, and health and fire departments all encounter animal cruelty during their normal course of duty but are often poorly informed about the warning signs and what steps to take if they become aware of animal abuse. Further, these groups are often unaware of the potential link between their concerns and animal cruelty or that their participation is needed to solve the problem.⁴² Although the humane treatment of animals is the top priority of animal welfare organizations, they are often ill-prepared to negotiate regulatory agencies and other government bureaucracies that need to be mobilized for an effective response to the more complicated cases of animal cruelty.⁴³

Coalitions develop active lines of communication among agencies that are most likely to interact with either the animal victims or perpetrators of animal cruelty.† Effective coalitions prevent redundant efforts, share resources, extend service areas, and address larger concerns (i.e., violence prevention) simultaneously.⁴⁴ Coalitions need to develop cross-training and cross-reporting mechanisms and multidisciplinary response teams to better protect the victims of animal cruelty and to address the underlying causes of animal cruelty. Particularly in the case of animal hoarding, even after the animals are removed from the situation, the property remains unsafe and unsanitary and the causes of the offender's behavior have not been addressed.⁴⁵ Coalitions with public health, housing, and social services representatives will be better equipped to manage an animal-hoarding situation than the police acting independently.

† Practitioners in Toledo, Ohio, held a one-day workshop, "Violence is Preventable," which stressed the overlapping missions of the agencies involved. Key discussions included territoriality, fears about losing financial support and human resources, perceived threats to individual agencies' autonomy, and conflicts over style and methods of approaching the work (Boatfield and Vallongo 1999). Groups seeking to address the linkage between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence have developed guidelines for coalitions that include agencies from the "animal world" and the "human world" (Linkage Project 2010). The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium developed a five-step process for creating an integrated approach to addressing animal hoarding (Patronek, Loar, and Nathanson 2006).

Intervening early. Early intervention can prevent further or more serious animal cruelty from occurring. While it may make prosecution easier, waiting until an animal is severely injured is not in the animal's best interest. Offering information and guidance at the first sign of an animal's distress improves the likelihood that the harm to the animal will be limited.⁴⁶ Most cases of animal cruelty are not complicated (e.g., animals without food, water, or proper shelter) and can be rectified by addressing the issues that led to the animals' mistreatment.

Specific Responses to Reduce Animal Cruelty

Responses that Increase Suspected Animal Cruelty Referrals

1. Training across disciplines and developing cross-reporting

mechanisms. Because the risk factors for animal cruelty mirror those for domestic violence and child abuse, groups working to reduce animal cruelty have an opportunity to merge various violence-prevention initiatives. Animal cruelty can signify broader family dysfunction. Training animal welfare workers on the mission, objectives, and procedures of child and adult protective services, and vice versa, highlights the common ground across the two worlds.† However, knowing only what each organization does is not sufficient: staff need to know how to navigate the other agencies' structures and must understand their cultures.[47](#)

† The Linkage Project trains animal control and welfare officers to recognize and report child abuse and train social-service staff to refer cases of suspected animal cruelty to the proper organization (Linkage Project 2010).

Once agencies have committed to working together and understand how their duties intersect, cross-reporting mechanisms are needed.‡ When warning signs come to their attention, all staff need to understand how to exchange information within the boundaries of client confidentiality laws.[48](#) Staff should be encouraged to collect information and report their suspicions, but should be deterred from attempting to investigate an issue that lies within another agency's legal jurisdiction.[49](#) Cross-reporting protocols have resulted in higher detection rates for all types of domestic abuse and animal cruelty.[50](#)

‡ The Baltimore Mayor's Anti-Animal Abuse Task Force printed bookmarks titled "When It Comes to Animal Abuse, We Can't Speak for Ourselves. Will You Give Us a Voice?" The bookmark includes information on what constitutes animal abuse and how to report it (Baltimore Mayor's Anti-Animal Abuse Task Force 2010).

2. Training veterinarians to recognize and report nonaccidental injuries. Many animal cruelty offenders will not seek medical treatment for the animal. However, some offenders, nonoffending family members, or other concerned individuals will bring an injured or neglected animal to a veterinarian, placing veterinarians in an ideal position to detect and report animal cruelty. Dynamics suggesting an animal's injury was not accidental include the following:[51](#)

- *Missing or inconsistent explanations:* the owner refuses to explain how the injury occurred, the injury was unlikely to be caused in the manner explained, or the explanation for the injury changes from person to person or over time.
- *Delays in seeking treatment:* offenders wait to see if the animal will recover on its own or ignore obvious signs of illness or suffering until they cannot be ignored any longer.

- *Unusual animal behavior*: animals are subdued or openly frightened in the owner's presence but become happy and affectionate when the owner is not there; animals are excessively aggressive or submissive. (Mistreated animals are not always frightened of their abusers.)
- *Suspicious clinical signs*: multiple fractures in various bones and in various stages of healing; suspicious bruises; multiple injuries occurring in the same home.

While none of these warning signs are diagnostic on their own, veterinarians should be suspicious when they occur in combination.†

† The American Veterinary Medical Association developed a client questionnaire and decision-tree for assessing the risk of animal maltreatment (Arkow, Boyden, and Patterson-Kane 2011).

When veterinarians detect suspicious injuries or conditions suggesting chronic neglect, many states require them to report their suspicions to law enforcement or humane authorities. Veterinarians should determine whether reporting is mandatory, what type of immunity is provided, and to whom to make the report.⁵²

3. Increasing public awareness and surveillance. Public meetings, animal cruelty awareness campaigns, and outreach to school-age children can increase awareness of the warning signs of animal neglect and abuse.‡ The public has become increasingly informed about animal cruelty through television shows like "Animal Precinct" and "Animal COPS," along with media coverage of high-profile cases. Although media coverage raises awareness, the nature of the cases selected for coverage may mislead the public into thinking that animal mistreatment must be extreme in order to draw attention from police or animal welfare organizations.⁵³ Public awareness campaigns should highlight the fact that most cases of animal abuse and neglect are less dramatic, but involve equally unacceptable mistreatment of animals.† Citizen patrols should be alerted to the warning signs of animal cruelty.

‡ The American Humane Association publishes a guide for parents introducing pets into their home to reinforce both animal and child safety (American Humane Association 2010a; American Humane Association 2010b).

† See Response Guide No. 5, *Crime Prevention Publicity Campaigns*, for more detailed information.

4. Creating mechanisms for reporting suspected animal abuse anonymously. In some communities, people do not report suspected animal cruelty because they fear retaliation from the animal's owner. When animal abuse reporting dovetails with other crime reporting programs or city-service request systems, and citizens can report their suspicions anonymously, they may be more likely to do so.‡

‡ The Baltimore Mayor's Anti-Animal Abuse Task Force developed a mechanism for citizen watch patrols to report suspected animal abuse using a confidential crime-watch

number. The caller's identity is not given to the responding officer (Baltimore Mayor's Anti-Animal Abuse Task Force 2010).

Responses that Increase Expertise in Preventing Animal Cruelty

5. Developing expertise among criminal justice practitioners. A study by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) showed that only 19 percent of police officers in the United States received formal training on animal cruelty, only 41 percent were familiar with the applicable laws, and only 30 percent were familiar with the penalties that could be imposed for mistreating animals.⁵⁴ Animal welfare organizations are often willing to teach police and prosecutors about the warning signs and symptoms of animal cruelty, and some schools offer animal cruelty investigation certification programs[§], ⁵⁵ Training should include information on analyzing and interpreting animal cruelty laws, writing search-and-seizure warrants for animal cruelty cases, investigating animal cruelty, collecting and handling evidence from animal cruelty crime scenes, prosecuting animal cruelty cases, and advocating for appropriate penalties for convicted offenders.⁵⁶ Police can also consult with prosecutors about how to address suspicious animal treatment encountered during the course of duty.[¶]

[§] The Chicago Police Department offers web-based training on animal cruelty for its officers. The department also collaborated with the local animal control agency to develop a reference manual for assembling an animal cruelty case and "palm cards" printed with essential information about state and municipal animal cruelty laws (Frasch 2008).

[¶] At one time, the Fulton County (Georgia) Prosecutor's Office had a 24-hour hotline staffed by an attorney to ensure that first responders properly collect and preserve evidence at animal cruelty crime scenes. The prosecutor directed police to photograph certain elements of the crime scene, obtain samples of environmental materials, or to deliver the animal's body to a particular location for examination (Garrett 2008). Although this resource is no longer available, the model could still be replicated. Garrett (2008) provides specific guidance on the types of evidence needed for prosecuting animal cruelty cases.

6. Improving veterinarians' abilities to conduct forensic examinations. Veterinarians play an essential role in the response to severe cases of animal cruelty and hoarding. If the case is to be prosecuted, veterinarians must document the physical condition of all of the animals involved, comment on prudent actions or standards of care that could have prevented the injury or death, determine the cause of death and the sequence of injuries, and identify and preserve evidence.⁵⁷ Most veterinarians are not familiar with legal standards of evidence and do not regularly autopsy dead animals.[†] Some communities will need to seek outside forensic veterinary expertise when confronted with complex or serious animal cruelty cases.[‡]

[†] Arkow, Boyden, and Patterson-Kane (2011) provide detailed protocols for collecting and preserving evidence in animal cruelty cases.

‡ The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Mobile Animal Crime Scene Investigation Units travel to locations throughout the country to help police collect and process evidence at animal cruelty crime scenes. In addition, a few veterinary schools offer classes in crime-scene processing, determining the time of death or injury, bloodstain pattern, bite mark analysis, and so on (Siebert 2010).

Responses that Target Offenders

7. Providing Humane Education programs to at-risk children. Humane Education programs based in schools and the community teach children how to care for animals and how to interact with them in appropriate ways.⁵⁸ Bringing at-risk children in contact with shelter animals can create empathy, which is believed to be a core protective factor. However, evidence as to the effectiveness of these programs is largely anecdotal.⁵⁹

8. Educating low-level offenders. Sometimes, what can appear to be cruelty may be the result of ignorance or cultural traditions, rather than the intent to harm an animal. Further, some cases that come to the attention of police barely qualify as cruelty, yet have the potential to harm the animal if the owners' practices continue unchecked. In these situations, adopting the role of an animal welfare educator can help police address the immediate problem without consuming expensive and time-consuming legal resources. For example, police can explain that tethered animals risk disease when forced to eat, sleep, urinate, and defecate in limited space and can suggest humane alternatives like fencing, kennels, and cable trolleys on swivels.⁶⁰ Explaining why certain practices are dangerous and how to meet animals' basic needs for food, water, and shelter may resolve the situation. Legal remedies should be pursued if education efforts are unsuccessful.

9. Prosecuting offenders. When offenders who have neglected their animals are unable or unwilling to comply with informal recommendations, or when the physical abuse of the animal is egregious, prosecution may be warranted. That said, animal cruelty cases are difficult to prove, often complicated, and require expertise in relevant laws, veterinary medicine, and veterinary forensics.† Prosecution can be costly, time consuming, and is effective only when the underlying causes of the behavior are addressed through sentencing provisions.

10. Increasing the severity and range of penalties. Over the past decade, most states have enacted felony-level animal cruelty statutes that increase the severity of penalties associated with a conviction.⁶¹ The most effective penalties are those that impose fines, restitution, or other financial sanctions that can be used to defray the significant costs associated with the seizure, treatment, long-term care, and housing of mistreated animals.⁶² Mental health treatment should be required, as discussed below. Limiting offenders' contact with animal victims and preventing offenders from owning animals in the future make recidivism less likely. Except in the most egregious cases, incarcerating offenders is unlikely to be popular when public safety resources are limited.

11. Counseling and treating more serious offenders. Many state laws require psychological evaluation and counseling for convicted offenders, usually at the offender's expense. Because animal cruelty takes many forms and offenders have different motivations, the treatment approach should be informed by the surrounding factors, such as co-occurring domestic violence, substance abuse, trauma, or victimization.⁶³ Unfortunately, many communities that have identified a need for specialized treatment for animal abusers have been unable to locate local, qualified professionals to provide the service.⁶⁴, ‡

‡ The Animal Legal Defense Funds (ALDF) "Zero Tolerance for Cruelty" campaign provides direct legal assistance to prosecutors handling animal cruelty cases. ALDF staff may conduct legal research, submit briefs to the court, and locate expert witnesses, among other services (Tischler 1999). In 2011 the National District Attorneys Association created the National Center for the Prosecution of Animal Abuse to aid prosecutors in building animal cruelty cases.

‡ The AniCare Model for the Treatment of Animal Abusers is a cognitive-behavioral treatment program for animal abusers that features models for adults and children. Workshops for social service and criminal justice professionals are also available.

Researchers agree that without treatment, most hoarders will reoffend.⁶⁵ Simply removing animals and cleaning up the premises ignores the root causes of the offenders' behavior. Instead, a multidisciplinary team (e.g., health services, social services, housing, mental health, and animal welfare, and law enforcement) should be convened to address the broader problems of untreated mental illness and inadequate self-care.† Because hoarders differ in their motivations and willingness to understand what went wrong and how to solve the problem, treatment must be appropriately nuanced.⁶⁶ The best results are obtained when the various professionals maintain contact with the offender over a period of time and make frequent, unannounced follow-up visits to ensure the hoarding behavior does not begin again.⁶⁷ All contacts with the offender should be documented, including the nature of advice offered, observations about the conditions of the animals and the individual, and how their conditions change over time.⁶⁸

† Nathanson (2009); Fleury (2007); and Patronek, Loar, and Nathanson (2006) offer additional guidance for professionals working with hoarders.

Responses that Protect Animal Victims

12. Seizing or requiring mistreated animals to be forfeited. People who abuse and seriously neglect animals have demonstrated that they are a serious threat to the animals' well-being. Most states have provisions for police or animal welfare organizations to take mistreated animals into custody. Temporary seizure protects the animal pending the outcome of the legal process, while permanent forfeiture can speed the animals' transfer to a safe, permanent living situation.⁶⁹ Expertise in seizure and forfeiture laws is essential, because they are often complex and may have short deadlines.⁷⁰ While seizure and forfeiture provisions protect animals from subsequent

harm, they can place an enormous burden on the responsible agency, which must provide housing, treatment, and ongoing care.⁷¹ Some jurisdictions require offenders to post bond to compensate agencies providing care, with failure to pay resulting in permanent forfeiture of the animal.

13. Creating foster placements for the pets of domestic violence victims. Many victims of domestic violence report that their abusive partners have threatened or mistreated their pets. Concern for their animals' welfare and the fact that most domestic violence shelters do not accommodate pets are obstacles for women trying to escape domestic violence. Many states have foster-care placements and temporary shelters to protect animals from mistreatment and to facilitate continued contact between the victims of domestic violence and their pets.† These programs must establish procedures for transportation, addressing the animals' health needs, visitation policies, client confidentiality, and safety., ⁷² ‡

† The Humane Society of the United States provides an on-line directory of Safe Havens for Animals (Humane Society of the United States 2009).

‡ Ascione (2000) created a guidebook containing the collective wisdom and experiences of programs sheltering pets for victims of domestic violence.

For more information, please go to: <https://popcenter.asu.edu/content/animal-cruelty-page-3>