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Abuse and Neglect of Animals and People, An Update

By

Edward F. Ansello, PhD

We wrote about the growing public awareness of a connection between animal and human abuse and neglect in an editorial several months ago (*Age in Action*, Winter 2016). Veterinarians anecdotally have noticed for quite some time that individuals who mistreat their animals may not stop there, carrying over their behavior to spouses, parents and others. Research articles and “overview” publications have increased in number, as have advocacy groups and just the beginnings of connections between domestic violence and animal rights groups.

Now, the most recent issue of *The LINK-Letter*, a newsletter of the National Link Coalition devoted to the relationship between animal and human abuse and neglect, contains an impressive 30 pages of developments related to this topic, from legislative initiative to stories, both positive and not so. Here is a sample.

A Portuguese graduate student wrote her thesis on how Portuguese veterinarians respond to mistreatment of companion animals and appreciate the link to mistreatment of humans. The LINK-Letter noted: “While recognizing the existence of a link between animal and human abuse, responding practitioners felt less comfortable about issues of human abuse, often due to their lack of knowledge of how to offer help. Her findings mirror earlier reports from the U.S. and other Western nations in which practitioners were initially reluctant to get involved in the recognition and reporting of animal abuse and other forms of family violence for similar reasons. Additional training in recent years, combined with legislation and professional policies mandating or permitting reporting of suspected abuse without fear of criminal or civil liability, have dramatically helped to reduce these barriers.”

The *New York Times* (August 28, 2017) featured Connecticut’s pioneering criminal justice procedure whereby courts can appoint *pro bono* attorneys and law school students to represent the interests of animals in cruelty cases, both to deliver better justice for the animals and prevent future crimes against persons. The article focused on a case in Superior Court in Manchester (CT) involving eight pit bulls. Several members of “Desmond’s Army,” purple-shirted volunteers who assist with the legal defenses, were present. As LINK-Letter stated:

“The volunteers, and the law creating the legal defense process, were named for a dog that was brutally beaten, starved and strangled; its owner served no jail time and received only accelerated rehabilitation. ‘This is not just about animals,’ said Christine Kiernan, founder of Desmond’s Army. ‘It’s about stopping the cycle of violence, but it usually starts with animals.’ The law was the brainchild of State Rep. Diana Urban who argued that violence against animals often has close ties with violence against people, either as a precursor to escalating crimes or as an indicator of a home environment where other crimes, such as domestic violence, may be occurring.”

Canada will hold its first nationwide LINK Conference, in Ottawa on December 4-6, 2017. It intends to bring together for the first time “leaders from across North America to examine the Link between violence against humans and animals, vulnerabilities in both populations, and how various sectors can learn from each other and gain the necessary tools to stop the cycle of violence.”

A just-published study on the relationship between childhood animal cruelty and future interpersonal violent acts disclosed the importance of how often the former occurred. Researchers collected data from 257 inmates at a medium security prison in the Southern USA to examine the “recurrency” of the animal cruelty. They found that recurrent childhood cruelty against animals significantly predicted recurrent adult interpersonal violence. “Inmates who engaged in recurrent childhood animal cruelty were more likely to commit recurrent adult interpersonal violence. Respondents’ race, education, and childhood residence were not significant predictors of the outcome variable.” The research citation is: Trentham, C. E., Hensley, C., & Policastro, C. (2017). Recurrent childhood animal cruelty and its link to recurrent adult interpersonal violence. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*. Published online July 14, 2017.

The South Florida Link Coalition has published its first newsletter; it’s intended to help survivors of domestic violence find foster care for their animals and to foster community change. The Oklahoma Link Coalition is planning an affordable conference entitled “Link” for November 7, 2017 in Oklahoma City, with an array of knowledgeable speakers. Well over a dozen states have pending legislation that addresses domestic violence and pet protection, animal and elder abuse, psychological status of animal abusers, and other related matters.

Awareness and action have ratcheted up. To read the current September issue and to learn more about the LINK, go to: <http://nationallinkcoalition.org> and click on LINK-Letter archives or any of several helpful resources nationally and internationally.