



# Pet Safety and Women

Options for women with pets  
leaving abusive situations

March 2018

# Background

There has long been a connection to violence against women and violence against pets or companion animals. OAITH, our member shelters, and all women's shelters in Ontario are aware that women who experience gender based domestic violence are less likely to leave the violent situation if there is a pet or companion animal in the home. Reasons for this include fear for the animal's safety; fear of harm, violence or worse perpetrated on the animal, which are often used as threats by abusers.

OAITH has written this document as an information tool with multiple options that shelters may choose and consider, based always on the needs of the women they serve, their internal capacity, and resources.

## Purpose

Every year, OAITH receives phone calls asking about the SafePet program (detailed description to follow) and until now we had no information regarding which shelters provide what services.

This document is our response to these inquiries, and we hope that by gathering this information in one place, and updating it annually, women and shelter workers can see what is available.

# Research connecting VAW/GBV and animal abuse

## Preliminary Findings

Dr. Amy Fitzgerald<sup>1</sup> is an Assistant Professor in the Criminology Program of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Windsor. She has taught in the areas of gender, family, administration of criminal justice, corporate and governmental crime, and victimology. Her areas of interest include gender studies, criminology, environmental sociology, and the sociology of non-human animals (also referred to as animal studies). She has conducted research on the relationship between animal abuse and family violence.

## A. Connections between Intimate Partner Violence and Animal Abuse

From Dr. Fitzgerald<sup>2</sup>, “some form animal maltreatment was present in roughly 89 per cent of domestic violence cases.”

“Researchers also found that three quarters of the people working in shelters know of women who do not leave at all, because they could not bring their animals with them.”

“56% of clients surveyed reported delaying leaving the abuser because of their pets. These clients are also more likely to report they were severely abused.”<sup>3</sup> A study in Alberta found that “59% of abused women who had animals delayed leaving out of concern for their animals.”<sup>4</sup>

Close to half the women surveyed by Dr. Fitzgerald and her team said they would have left earlier if they could have brought their pet with them.

“In the general literature on IPV [Intimate Partner Violence], control has been highlighted as a motivator for abuse ... In fact, in his delineations of types of abusive violence, Johnson ... used threats to children and pets as a measure to discern between types of abusive violence. He conceptualizes threats against children and pets as a tactic of control, as well as a diffusion of anger and aggression in an effort to manipulate the abused partner, and identifies them as a marker of coercive controlling violence (previously referred to as intimate terrorism). Coercive controlling violence is the type of IPV most often seen in shelter samples.”<sup>5</sup>

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1 For Dr. Fitzgerald’s full biography: <http://www1.uwindsor.ca/hrc/amy-fitzgerald>

2 Dr. Fitzgerald (phone conversation) and <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/women-with-pets-more-likely-to-endure-domestic-abuse-study-finds-1.4151113>

3 “Animal Maltreatment as a Risk Marker of More Frequent and Severe Forms of Intimate Partner Violence” (Sage 2017) <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0886260517719542>

4 “The Cruelty Connection: The relationships Between Animal Cruelty, Child Abuse and Domestic Violence” <https://www.albertaspca.org/resources/publications/CrueltyConnection%20web.pdf>

5 See footnote 3

## B. Animal Abuse/Mistreatment connected to more severe forms of abuse<sup>6</sup>

“Among women with companion animals during their abusive relationships, animal maltreatment was a common experience: Approximately 89% of the women who had pets reported they had been mistreated by their partner.”

“[W]omen whose pets were more frequently and severely abused reported greater levels of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse directed at them by their partners than those who reported little or no maltreatment of their pets by their partner.”

“Other studies indicate that batterers who abuse pets are more dangerous in that they perpetrate more types of IPV, more severe IPV, and exhibit more controlling behavior.”<sup>7</sup>

“After controlling for length of relationship and levels of physical abuse experienced by women, severe physical abuse of pets was found to be significantly associated with the number of times survivors had left their most recent abusive relationship . . . , in that as the level of severe physical abuse perpetrated against their pets increased, so too did the number of previous attempts women had made to leave the abusive relationship.”<sup>8</sup>

## C. Intimate Partner Violence, Animal Abuse, and Help-Seeking<sup>9</sup>

“The complexities of this decision-making process are even more pronounced when considering the role that companion animals play in facilitating or impeding a woman’s decision to seek formal help when involved in abusive relationships. Survivors of IPV engage in a continual cost-benefit analysis when deciding to seek help, and knowing where pets fit into this decision-making process is important, especially if we want to encourage help-seeking by ensuring that the available supports and services meet the actual needs of survivors. “

“The inability to take their pets with them or to find other suitable arrangements, and a fear of leaving their pets with the abuser . . . may keep some women in abusive relationships. Additionally, a less direct relationship between pets and delayed help-seeking has been noted by Fitzgerald (2007), who found that women reported that having pets provided them with the support they needed to remain in the abusive relationships.”

While animal abuse had been mostly thought of as a reason that women remain in abusive situations, which is true, researchers also found that some women who reported threats of abuse or actual abuse against their pets, said that the pets had been part of their motivation to leave the abuser.

“[W]omen who experience more frequent physical IPV are more likely to report that they would have left their abuser earlier if they could have brought their pets to shelter with them.”<sup>10</sup>

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6 “Animal Maltreatment as a Risk Marker of More Frequent and Severe Forms of Intimate Partner Violence” (Sage 2017)

7 “Help-seeking among abused women with pets: Evidence from a Canadian sample” (unpublished) by Dr Amy Fitzgerald

8 See footnote 7

9 See footnote 7

10 “Help-seeking among abused women with pets: Evidence from a Canadian sample” (unpublished) by Dr Amy Fitzgerald

## D. Links between Animal Abuse and Child Abuse

There are very few studies about the links between animal abuse and child abuse, and the two cited below mostly link childhood abuse to a greater prevalence of the adult child being more likely to be abusive towards animals.

However, a clear statistical incidence is present regarding homes where there is domestic violence and animal abuse.

“[I]ncidence of animal abuse is disproportionately higher in homes where family violence is present compared to homes where violence is not present”<sup>11</sup>

“80% of families with substantiated child physical abuse had existing records of companion animal abuse versus 34% of families with either substantiated child sexual abuse or neglect. These findings suggest that the abuse of children and animals within a home may be fairly common and that identifying the specific type(s) of child maltreatment experienced may be important when exploring the nature and strength of the relationship between animal- and child-directed violence.”<sup>12</sup>

## E. Summary

It is clear that there are serious and important connections between woman abuse, pets/companion animals, child abuse, and the impact on women looking to leave abusive situations.

There is much evidence-based research that is ongoing on this topic. As reports and studies are released and published, please check OAITH’s online library at [www.oaith.ca/resource\\_library](http://www.oaith.ca/resource_library).

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11 “Animal Abuse, Family Violence and Child Well-Being” by Samara McPhedron. *Journal of Family Violence* (2009)

12 “Is Animal Cruelty a ‘Red Flag’ for Family Violence: Investigating Co-Occurring Violence Toward Children, Partners, and Pets” by Sarah DeGue et al. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2009)

## Preamble to Services for Pets of Women Seeking Support in Women's Shelters

In the next few pages are some charts detailing different options different shelters have done and currently do to provide support for women with pets and companion animals.

The SafePet Program, in its various regional forms, is one such program. We wanted to provide a history and a current update about this program to provide clarity.

# History and Background of the SafePet Program

In 2003 the Ontario Veterinarian Medical Association created the OVMA SafePet Program to assist women at risk of abuse in making the decision to leave an abusive situation and enter a registered women's shelter.

OMVA SafePet Program was initiated by the Ontario Veterinarian Medical Association (OVMA) and underwent a series of changes. In 2013, it was updated with the input from OAITH and Action Ontarienne Contre La Violence Faite Aux Femmes.

The idea behind the SafePet Program is that shelters across the province would partner with veterinarians in their region who would offer free medical exams and vaccinations for all companion animals owned by women who are clients of local women shelters, for the duration of the women's stay at the shelter. OVMA's Farley Foundation could provide funding if the pet was sick or injured.. All information about the animal(s) would be documented.

Under the SafePet Program, women's shelters act as the hub for the program by facilitating a relationship with program volunteers. Volunteers include pet foster families and OVMA volunteer veterinary clinics.

SafePet Ottawa (SPO) is a regional pet foster program. SPO follows the protocols of the 2013 update to the Program and is a completely volunteer-run organization. SPO has taken the Program model and taken on the role of recruiting, training and coordinating the foster families. SPO is the contact between shelters and volunteers. SPO's model does not allow the women to have access to their animals while the animal is being fostered. OVMA's protocols leave that decision to the local community to decide.

The structure as developed can have some limitations, including the effort to recruit, train and coordinate volunteers. The Program includes release forms/waivers, to protect the pet owner, volunteers and veterinary clinic. If the woman does not claim the pet within a certain time period after she leaves the shelter, the pet is considered to be abandoned and will be permanently re-housed.

# Pet Safety and Women Survey Conducted by OAITH

From October to December 2017, OAITH conducted an online survey, in English and French, of all shelters in Ontario.

A total of 84 Ontario women's shelters responded. Results of the survey are below.

Because shelters were encouraged to click as many responses that apply, the numbers will not match the number of completed surveys.

**Question: Do you offer any of the following services or accommodations for pets of women who have experienced violence? Please check all that apply.**

We allow pets to remain with women in the shelter. (4)	5 %
We have an on-site kennel located outside the shelter. (2)	1 %
We make arrangements with local pet foster families to care for pets while women stay with us. (26)	33 %
We currently do not offer any services for pets of women fleeing violence, but hope to do so in the future. (21)	26 %
We do not offer any services for pets of women fleeing violence (10)	12 %
Other (43): See below for details	54 %

Under "Other" were the following themes:

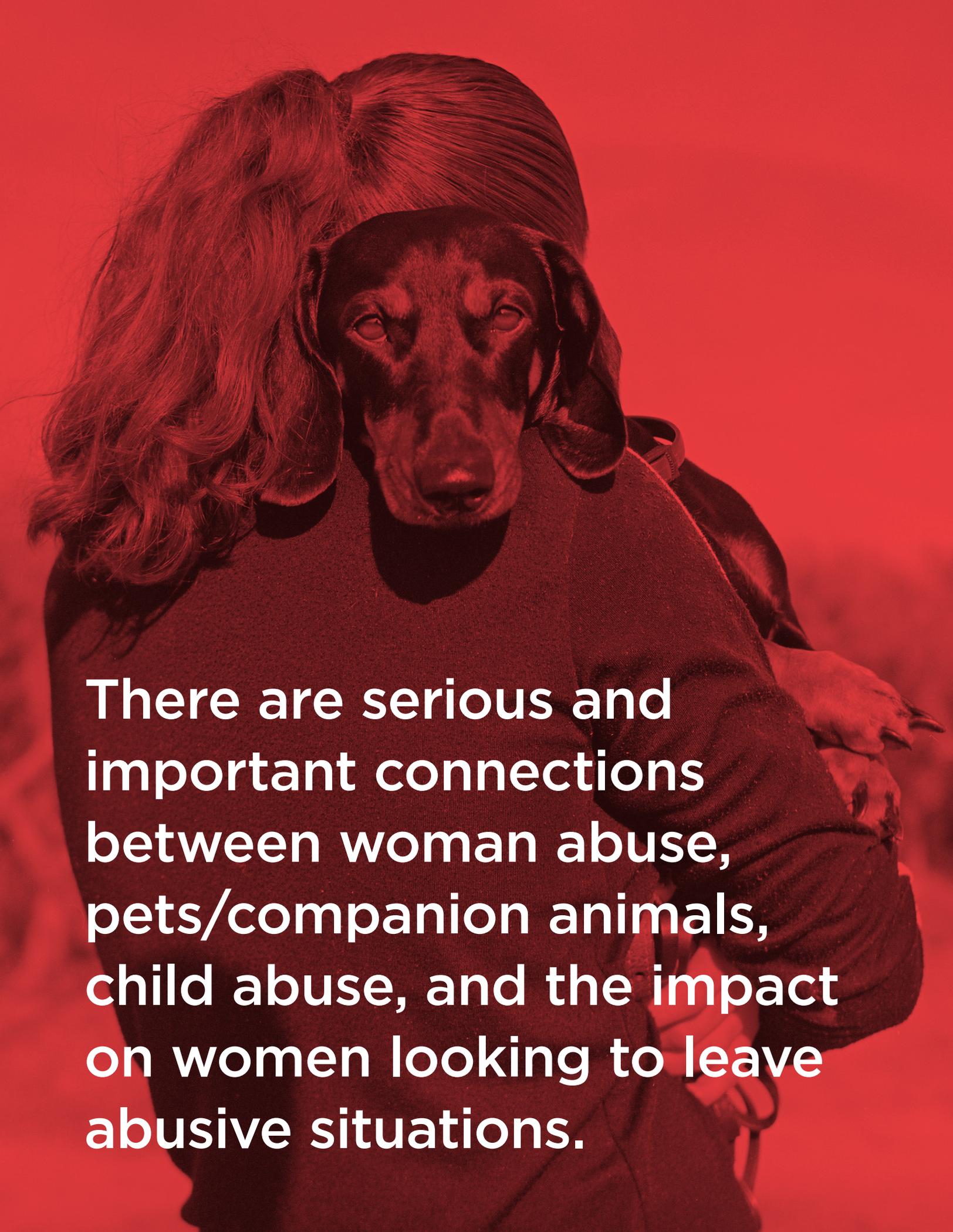
17 shelters said they assist women to find foster/temporary housing for pets, as needed	41%
14 said they have agreements with local vets or SPCA or Humane Societies in their region.	34%
5 said they work with SafePet Ottawa	12%
3 can accommodate some pets on-site for limited time (emergencies only, and for one or two days maximum, depending on capacity at the shelter)	7%
2 can accept pets in the shelter on a case by case basis	5%
2 said they used to participate in the SafePet Program but no longer do so as there is no longer a participating vet or foster home structure in their region	5%
One said they are opening on-site kennels in 2018	2%

# Supportive Services Shelters Can Offer for Women with Pets & Companion Animals

Service	The shelter has an on-site heated kennel for pets and companion animals
<b>Advantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The women’s pets are safe and secure during her stay at the shelter</li> <li>• Women and children have access to their pets during their stay at the shelter</li> </ul>
<b>Barriers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very few shelters in Ontario have this service available</li> <li>• Space, costs, maintenance and shelter staff capacity, administration</li> </ul>
<b>Actions for Shelters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needs assessment: where will the kennels be located, how many kennels are needed to serve the demand, how many more women will access the shelter when this is in place</li> <li>• One-time funding needs to be obtained to do the build</li> <li>• Ongoing maintenance costs</li> <li>• Ongoing food costs</li> <li>• Must promote publicly that the shelter provides this service: flyers, emails, website.</li> </ul>
Service	The shelter accommodates pets within the shelter
<b>Advantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The pets are safe and secure</li> <li>• Women and children have access to their pets during their stay at the shelter</li> </ul>
<b>Barriers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conditions in the shelter may not allow this as ongoing service ie. capacity for only one animal at a time</li> <li>• Needs of staff and other residents may be infringed upon for example allergies, religious beliefs, fear of animals</li> </ul>
<b>Actions for Shelters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needs assessment, how many more women will access the shelter when this is in place</li> <li>• Ideas: designated rooms for pets, designated area of the shelter for pets</li> <li>• Protocols for pet feeding and cleaning</li> <li>• Must promote publicly that the shelter provides this service: flyers, emails, website.</li> </ul>

<b>Service</b>	<b>The shelter coordinates on an ad hoc basis with local rescue, Humane Society, veterinarians and/or pet fostering services</b>
<b>Advantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The women's pets are safe and secure during her stay at the shelter</li> <li>• If there is an ongoing partnership, administration and coordination is done by the partner organization, not the women's shelter</li> </ul>
<b>Barriers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is no contact with the pet through the duration of the woman's time at the shelter</li> <li>• Shelter staff capacity: administration, coordination</li> </ul>
<b>Actions for Shelters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having a dedicated volunteer(s) or staff person to be the coordinator</li> <li>• Must promote publicly that the shelter provides this service: flyers, emails, website.</li> </ul>
<b>Service</b>	<b>The shelter assists in finding a foster family known to the woman</b>
<b>Advantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The women's pets are safe and secure during her stay at the shelter</li> </ul>
<b>Barriers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shelter staff capacity: administration, coordination</li> </ul>
<b>Actions for Shelters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having a dedicated volunteer(s) or staff person to be the coordinator</li> <li>• Must promote publicly that the shelter provides this service: flyers, emails, website.</li> </ul>
<b>Service</b>	<b>The shelter has created and maintained a formal relationship with local rescue, Human Society, veterinarians and/or pet fostering services</b>
<b>Advantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The women's pets are safe and secure during her stay at the shelter</li> <li>• Administration and coordination is done by the partner organization</li> <li>• The fostering organization can apply for grants</li> <li>• The fostering organization teaches foster families about the context of the women, their pets and recent violence</li> </ul>
<b>Barriers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There might be challenges in maintaining the partnership over time</li> <li>• There is no contact with the pet through the duration of the woman's time at the shelter</li> </ul>
<b>Actions for Shelters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having a dedicated volunteer(s) or staff person to be the coordinator</li> <li>• Ideally, this person will connect the shelter with a local vets, animal rescue organization, SPCA, Humane Society that has lists of potential foster families</li> <li>• Must promote publicly that the shelter provides this service: flyers, emails, website.</li> </ul>

<b>Service</b>	<b>OVMA SafePet and SafePet (Regional) Ottawa: <a href="https://safepetottawa.com">https://safepetottawa.com</a> Toronto: <a href="https://www.linktoronto.org/safepet">https://www.linktoronto.org/safepet</a></b>
<b>Advantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The women's pets are safe and secure during her stay at the shelter</li> </ul>
<b>Barriers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is no contact with the pet through the duration of the woman's time at the shelter</li> <li>• Shelter staff capacity: administration, coordination</li> </ul>
<b>Actions for Shelters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having a dedicated volunteer(s) or staff person to be the coordinator</li> <li>• Must promote publicly that the shelter coordinates this service: flyers, emails, website.</li> </ul>
<b>Service</b>	<b>Surrender the animal for permanent housing elsewhere</b>
<b>Advantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The pets are safe and secure</li> </ul>
<b>Barriers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The woman no longer owns the pets</li> </ul>



**There are serious and important connections between woman abuse, pets/companion animals, child abuse, and the impact on women looking to leave abusive situations.**



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