

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2008

Longmont Humane Society

Animals and domestic violence

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Since 1999, the Longmont Humane Society has been part of a community coalition to address the city's high incidence of domestic abuse. Called LEVI (Longmont Ending Violence Initiative), the group seeks to call attention to the problem and improve services to victims. The Humane Society is involved because many of the victims are pets.

Companion animals often are the first family members to be severely hurt by the perpetrator. They are completely vulnerable; they can't seek help on their own or tell what was done to them; they are effective "warnings," to the intended object of intimidation, of what may happen to them; and their mistreatment is less severely punished if it is discovered.

Studies show that up to 25 percent of women victims of abuse delay seeking shelter out of concern for the safety of companion animals they would have to leave behind — because women's shelters cannot take pets. One study found that 80

percent of women in shelters who had pets had witnessed their abuser's mistreatment of them.

The Longmont Humane Society has a longstanding tradition of providing care for the animal victims of family violence. Since LEVI's formation, all local service providers know to refer victims to us when they have no safe options for their animals. Predictably, the numbers have increased to the point that there are always some "safe-keep" pets in the shelter. Now that the new Allen Center is complete, we have much more capacity to house pets in safekeeping — and, equally important, they have a dedicated, secure location in the building, including a small, interior play yard, to which we encourage families to come and visit their animals as often as they can. No one in our community need delay seeking safety out of fear for their pets.

LEVI is undertaking a well-coordinated and innovative campaign against domestic violence. In a handful of cities equally plagued by high incidence of this crime, federal funding has enabled effective action. Early evidence of success in raising public awareness is an increase in the number of reports and arrests and the utilization of services such as shelter for all victims: adults, children and animals.

Longmont has a long way to go before we can expect to see family violence actually decrease. First, its prevalence must be exposed. In a local fact-finding survey, the majority of those polled by LEVI reported having first-hand experience of domestic violence. Only when citizens regard it as everyone's responsibility to report it and combat it like any other crime will abusers fear the consequences. Meanwhile, the most critical need is for safe havens for victims: not only to ensure their physical survival, but because we know that children who have experienced or witnessed violence in their families are much more likely to abuse pets and, later, their own spouses and children.

The first step is awareness. Animals — as well as women, children and the elderly — are frequent victims. We can all play a role in getting them the help that is available by keeping our eyes, ears and hearts open and recognizing the signs of abuse.