

Learning Network

Mobilizing knowledge to end gender-based violence

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Supporting Survivors with Animals in Contexts of Intimate Partner Violence

There is a close relationship between survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) and the animals in their lives. Animals may be considered part of the family, a close confidant, and an integral part of survivors' healing journey.¹ As such, many survivors consider their own safety as well as the safety of their animals when navigating experiences of IPV and help-seeking.

This Issue shares how to integrate the human-animal bond in IPV supports and services for survivors. It identifies the barriers that survivors with animals face in help-seeking and safety planning. Additionally, this Issue offers strategies for trauma- and violence-informed care in supporting survivors and animals with inspiring examples of cross-sectoral collaboration.

We use the language of animals instead of pets to recognize that survivors may be responsible for and have relationships with many different types of animals: farmed animals, working animals, companion animals, service animals, and other types of animals including animals not generally thought of as "pets" such as lizards. Further, survivors may not consider their animals property due to personal and cultural beliefs, despite how animals are legally defined as property across Canada.² However, we do use the language of pets when describing specific programs and efforts aimed at companion animals.

When working with survivors, use the language they use whether that be pet, animal, family, etc.

Guest Authorship:

This Issue is written by the [ACT \(Awareness, Collaboration, Tools\) Project for Women with Animals Experiencing Gender-Based Violence \(GBV\)](#). We are a Humane Canada initiative federally funded through Women and Gender Equality Canada. Our work is done collaboratively. [Click here for list of our partners.](#)

We developed an Adaptable Collaborative Response Model (ACRM) to guide program development and emerging practices to support survivors experiencing GBV with animals. This model aims to help organizations better support survivors in overcoming barriers toward securing a violence-free future.



Centering the Human-Animal Bond

The human-animal bond is often mutually beneficial, helping to support the health and wellbeing of both humans and animal. People bond with their animals in a variety of ways including spending time together, providing emotional support to each other, playing together, and offering structure and routine to one another (e.g., mealtimes, walks).

Survivors have shared that they have chosen to not leave, delay leaving, or return to an abusive relationship or shared home because of their bond to their animals.³

The reasons survivors are forced to make this choice include:

- A lack of funding and capacity for emergency crisis shelters to offer programs for animals.
- A lack of programs that include certain types of animals (e.g., large animals, farmed animals).
- Complications regarding the legal ownership of the animals.
- Concerns about the welfare of the animals, particularly if the survivor cannot bring the animals with them.

Those who do not understand the human-animal bond well may ask why the survivor did not just leave, why they did not leave the animal behind, or why they did not give the animal up.

These questions centre the blame on the survivor for the abuse they are experiencing and fail to recognize the bond between the survivor and their animals or the knowledge the survivor holds and utilizes to keep themselves safe.

For example, consider Ira's thoughts around safety and help-seeking with her horse Blaze:



Recognizing Violence Against Animals as a Form of Power and Control

In an abusive relationship, the person who harms may utilize the bond between the animal and the survivor to control, intimidate, harm, or make the survivor remain silent about the abuse.⁴ The person who harms may also threaten to or actively harm the animal as a way to control, harm, or intimidate the survivor.⁵

Forms of abuse against animals include:

- scaring or intimidating the animal on purpose animal
- injuring the animal (e.g., burns, choking, kicking)
- killing the animal
- withholding food and necessities from the
- caging the animal in limited space for long periods of time
- neglecting the animal's needs (e.g., grooming, sanitation)

As a result of this abuse, animals may hide, freeze, avoid unfamiliar people, shake or tremble, be aggressive (e.g., biting, hitting), over-groom or under-groom, alter eating or toilet habits, and experience stress-related sickness.

IPV and animal maltreatment are linked to each other, and further forms of violence. To learn more about the relationship between violence against people and animals, referred to as the Violence Link, [click here](#).



Understanding Barriers to Safety for Survivors with Animals

There are many barriers for survivors of IPV and their animals when accessing services and safe housing. This section provides a brief overview of several barriers identified through the Humane Canada's [ACT \(Awareness, Collaboration, Tools\) Project for Women with Animals Experiencing GBV](#); however, there are many more barriers that survivors of GBV with animals might experience. After outlining these barriers, the Issue moves on to identifying how we can respond to support survivors with animals in a trauma-and violence-informed way.

Limited Capacity and Funding to Emergency Shelters

Survivors may depend on access to emergency shelters that can keep them with their pet. However, emergency shelters are resource-limited and are either at or exceeding capacity to meet the current demand for support. It is not uncommon for survivors to call for space only to find that an emergency crisis IPV shelter is full, resulting in survivors needing to travel to other geographical areas to access safe housing. When there are not enough beds or spaces for the survivors themselves, it can be understandably challenging to justify allocating time and funding to animal-inclusive programs.

Emergency and second stage housing providers need more funding, support, and/or organizational capacity to begin implementing innovative programs for survivors with animals. However, while including animals in programs for survivors may require additional capacity, collaboration, funding, and/or resources, there are funding sources and grants that organizations can access which will support animal welfare and the human-animal bond.

Although the idea of offering animal sheltering programs may appear daunting, many of the organizations working with the ACT Project have shared that after having overcome the initial challenges of implementation, these programs become integral to their work and can be offered in sustainable ways with the support of community collaboration. We share recommendations, lessons learned, and resources for implementation in the next section.

Finding opportunities to build capacity for animal sheltering programs on-site or off-site as part of shelter programming can save human and animal lives and prevent further violence.



Lack of Housing for All

Beyond emergency shelters, finding safe and affordable housing can be challenging for all survivors of IPV.⁶ Survivors often face discrimination when searching for housing due to income, having poor or no credit, having children, relying on government assistance, having poor or no references, and many other structural forms of discrimination (e.g., racism, ableism, heteronormativity, cisnormativity). Some of these reasons may be due to the abuse they have experienced, including financial abuse.

Survivors with animals not only face the aforementioned forms of discrimination, but may also experience discrimination for the type, size, and number of animals they are responsible for or have a relationship with. For instance, although in Ontario it is illegal for landlords to discriminate against potential renters with pets, discrimination often still occurs in situations where survivors with animals are attempting to secure units.⁷

Survivors who wish to leave the home they share with the abusive person may face the risk of homelessness if they cannot find space for their animals. Many survivors must thus choose between their own safety and the safety of their animals.

The risk of homelessness may also be increased as survivors who are transitioning out of shelter settings have difficulties finding safe, affordable, and animal friendly housing.

The importance of advocating for safe, affordable, animal friendly housing in your community cannot be overemphasized.

It is important to offer flexible, adaptable, and innovative support to survivors with animals when possible. This may include offering an extension to their shelter stay or extending their access to an animal safekeeping program, advocating and educating landlords in your community about IPV, and educating survivors on their rights as tenants.



Ableism Against Survivors with Service Animals

Survivors with service animals may face additional challenges and discrimination. Legislation for service animals is fragmented across Canada, with some provinces and territories having clear, strict legislation to identify service animals and others having unclear or no legislation.⁸ This also means that survivors who flee to another province or territory with their service animal may encounter difficulties having their service animal recognized. Service providers may be unsure how to support survivors of IPV with service animals and they may be unsure of how to identify whether the animal is a service animal, emotional support animal, or companion animal.

Service animals are animals that have been trained to perform tasks for an individual with a disability. Emotional support animals are generally animals that provide emotional support for an individual. Emotional support animals may instinctively provide this support without necessarily being trained to do so. Service animals are protected by provincial legislation, that differs in each province and territory, however generally this legislation allows them to remain with their handlers in all situations so that they can perform the tasks they are trained for. The legislation does not provide the same protections for emotional support animals, and these animals may be denied from entering public spaces.

It is important to note that individuals with disabilities regularly face harmful discrimination and questioning of their disability, especially when a disability is not visible. Similarly, survivors experiencing IPV with service animals may be questioned regarding the validity of their service animals.

Consider Izzy's Story

Izzy is a non-binary survivor of IPV. Izzy left their home with their seizure service animal, Brian, to go to a domestic violence shelter. Shelter staff welcomed Izzy and asked for Brian's certification documents. Izzy shared they were not able to collect those documents in the rush to leave before their partner came home. In response, one staff member doubted Brian's status as a service animal since "they are only for people who are blind."

Believe survivors with disabilities when they disclose their disability and their needs!

A trauma- and violence-informed response could include:

- Believing Izzy.
- Recognizing the barriers that Izzy faced in gathering documents due to the violence they experienced.
- Training staff on service animals and policies around service animals.
- Asking Izzy to share more about Brian including his tasks and needs.
- Inviting Izzy to share more about their concerns for Brian's safety.



Victim-Blaming

Survivors of IPV with animals may face victim-blaming for the abuse of the animal by the person who harms. Abusive tactics could include withholding funds for animal food, care, or veterinary services or threatening the survivor should they attempt to provide food or care for the animal.⁹ The person who harms may commit acts of abuse against the animal and threaten the survivor if they take the animal for veterinary care. This can result in others, such as animal protective services or veterinary staff, viewing the animal as being abused or neglected by the survivor.

Often, animal service professionals, prosecutors, and others may not understand the complexities of IPV and the risk to the survivor and their animals in these circumstances. As such, survivors of IPV may be reluctant to report the abuse they or their animals experience and this may result in their animals not receiving the veterinary care they may require.

Further, even if survivors disclose the abuse they are experiencing, they still may face criminalization for the abuse or neglect their animal has experienced. Survivors may be blamed for not bringing the animal to veterinary support or reporting to animal services sooner, in a form of victim-blaming.

Recent studies in Canada that focused on the presence of IPV and animal abuse in family law cases have provided recommendations for improving the family justice system's attentiveness and responses to the Violence Link.

Learn more: [The Violence Link in Practice report](#) prepared by Humane Canada provides recommendations for improving the family justice system's attentiveness and responses to the Violence Link.

Promising Practice:

[Toronto Humane Society's Urgent Care program](#) supports survivors of IPV and their pets, as well as individuals experiencing health challenges, housing issues, or other hardships that temporarily hinder their ability to care for their pets. This program offers short-term foster care to ensure families can address the needs in front of them while feeling confident their animals are being cared for and loved until the time comes to be reunited. Animals in this program receive a physical exam and veterinary care throughout the duration of the foster period. Toronto Humane Society also provides all necessary animal-related expenses including training and behaviour support to survivors whose animals may benefit. Urgent Care offers an alternative to surrendering or rehoming and honours the special bond between pet parents and their animals, thereby keeping more pets where they belong – with their loving families.



Considerations for Working with Diverse Communities

Different communities may face challenges specific to their context. It is thus important consider the realities of these communities as well as their strengths. In this section, we share some considerations for working in a culturally-responsive manner:

Working with Official Language Minority Communities

Official Language Minority Communities (OLMC) are defined as French-speaking communities in Canada that are not in Quebec and English-speaking communities in Quebec. There are many French-speaking Canadians across the country, as well as individuals who are French-speaking and immigrate to Canada. Indeed, some immigrants and refugees may come to Canada expecting there to be accessible, bilingual services and may struggle when they live in English speaking communities.

We must consider how to integrate bilingualism into services, particularly IPV services that support survivors and their animals. When programs or resources are only offered in English, this excludes many survivors' voices and does not meet their needs.

Francophone and Anglophone services working collaboratively is essential to supporting survivors of IPV and their animals.



Working with Indigenous Communities

Some Indigenous communities have specific considerations and challenges in supporting survivors and animals including:

1. Limited access to veterinary care, especially on reserves and in northern communities. Often this results in survivors caring for their animals themselves through whatever means they have access to or through grassroots organizations offering support. Some survivors also access virtual veterinary services where available, which can be very costly like all veterinary care can be.
2. Requirements for documentation regarding ownership. Not all survivors view animals as property or consider their relationship with animals in colonial terms of ownership. This can be a challenge when accessing services, programs, and supports that may require documentation of ownership.
3. Lack of programs for survivors of IPV and their animals. There is limited space for survivors in emergency IPV shelters in Indigenous communities, which creates additional barriers for survivors thinking of fleeing an abusive relationship.
4. Survivors of IPV may have a relationship or connection with animals within the community and this may make it difficult (or impossible) for the survivor to leave the community. When thinking of solutions to support survivors in seeking safety, the Western idea of leaving a community to escape the violence is often put forward as the only option. There are other solutions being explored across the country such as restorative justice within the community or safe at home programs in which the survivor remains in their home and person who harms leaves the shared home and seeks support.

Additional funding and resources should be directed to Indigenous communities to support the continued resistance and solutions found within the communities themselves.

Critical Context:

When discussing GBV, we must acknowledge the connection to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, Transgender, and Gender Diverse People (MMIWG2S+). Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has been implementing, advocating, and educating Canadians about MMIWG2S+ and have created incredible resources to support others with this work including:

- [Safe Passage website](#) offering a trauma informed MMIWG2S+ database, research, information, and educational tools.
- [Teach the Genocide website](#) offering education to individuals about the genocide of Indigenous people across so-called Canada.



Working with Rural, Remote, Farming, and Northern Communities

In farming communities, there are many unique challenges. One consideration is that in a farming community, many survivors may make their income from an agriculture business. There are legal implications regarding leaving a relationship when the shared home might include an agriculture business, including the legal ability to bring farmed animals with the survivor when they leave. Additionally, if a survivor leaves, they may also be leaving their only source of income. There are many complexities to moving large or farmed animals, including transportation and biosecurity. Even if the survivor can bring large or farmed animals with them, it can be difficult to find space, supplies, and food for these animals.

Similar to farming communities, there may be different types of animals a survivor may have a relationship with or be responsible for in Northern communities, for example, a team of sled dogs. Survivors who care for such animals may face additional challenges in fleeing as it may be difficult to find support and space due to the number of animals requiring support.

It is essential to recognize a robust sense of community as a strength of rural, remote, farming, and northern communities. Often, within rural, remote, farming, and northern communities, individuals offer support, connection, and creative solutions to one another. Still, confidentiality and safety must be considered due to the risk of the person who harms learning about community members supporting the survivor and the increase in safety risk that could create.

Promising Practice:

[Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis](#) offers resources for rural clients and clients with large animals, including safety planning and foster placement through networks of animal rescues and other organizations.



Imagining a Community Safe for Survivors of IPV with Animals

What would it look like if we removed barriers for survivors with animals? That may involve:

- Local animal foster families available that share pictures and information to survivors.
- Intervention of animal control services trained on IPV to promote animal welfare.
- Protective orders that include animals.
- Funding for survivors to use kennels and boarding services.
- Animals having a housing area to stay in IPV shelters that is safe for all and has enrichment opportunities for animals.
- IPV staff training to support animals and the human-animal bond.
- Inclusion of animals in safety plans when fleeing IPV.
- Veterinary care programs for survivors and animals that are trauma- and violence-informed.
- Policies that promote animal-inclusive housing across the country.
- Funders and donors having a strong understanding of the human-animal bond.
- Ability to bring animals to appointments (e.g., physical health, counselling).
- Accessible and affordable certification of service animals and support in training emotional support animals.



Recommendations and Strategies to Support Survivors with Animals

The barriers outlined above require creative solutions. Here we share some of the ways that organizations across Canada have worked to support survivors with animals along with actionable tips for the short- and long-term.

Creating Animal Friendly Shelters

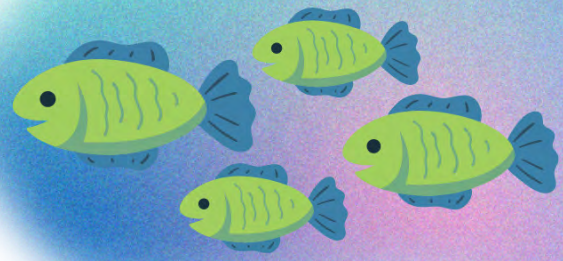
Animal-friendly shelters offer an alternative for survivors of IPV to have their animals with them as they flee violence, begin to heal, and start to set up a safe future for themselves and their families. These organizations can support survivors in having their animals with them as they take those crucial next steps in their journey.

The creation of animal friendly shelters can take many forms including animals in individual rooms or communal housing for animals within the shelter. Learn more about options in this handbook about [Exploring Ways to Create and Sustain Pet Housing Programs](#) from Don't Forget the Pets.

When it is not possible to create an animal friendly space, IPV organizations can create partnerships between shelters that do not or cannot accommodate animals and shelters that have beds available for survivors with animals. IPV organizations in similar geographical areas can collaborate by transferring survivors without animals or survivors who may have allergies or concerns with animals to shelters that are not animal-friendly, so that everyone's needs can be met. In addition, IPV organizations could save time and capacity by sharing resources, tools, templates, and other materials utilized for their programs to support other programs.

Promising Practice:

[Interval House of Ottawa](#) offers space to survivors, their children, and their pets including dogs, cats, and other small animals. It has a separate space for pets including two pet friendly living rooms, separate areas for dogs, cats, and small animals to live, a food preparation room with laundry, and a large, enclosed outdoor yard. This space ensures that other shelter residents who have fears or allergies will not be impacted by the pets, while ensuring residents with animals are able to have the support of their pet and knowledge that their pet is safe with them.



Learn more: [Humane Canada's ACT Online Learning Centre](#) offers information, pictures, tips, and strategies to support organizations in utilizing their current space for animals, building additional space, or other alternatives, such as utilizing current rooms to include survivors with their animals. The website also offers ideas, strategies, and innovative ways to secure funding. There are grants, funding sources, and potential fundraising opportunities that exist or have already been successful in providing sustainable funding for these programs.

Collaborating to Support Survivors and Animals

Collaborative partnerships can lead to programs that require smaller efforts on the part of each collaborator while still achieving a large collective impact.

During the ACT Project's conversations with animal and human service organizations across the country, we heard from organizations that they were concerned that supporting survivors with animals was outside the scope of their work. IPV organizations were unsure if supporting animals was within their scope, and animal service organizations were unsure about how supporting survivors fit into their missions of working with animals. Collaboration between animal and human services offers space for these conversations where organizations can work together, within their scope of practice, to ensure survivors and animals are supported together.

Opportunities for collaborative programs range from boarding and fostering animals off-site while survivors work with IPV services to animal friendly IPV shelters with the support of animal service organizations (such as veterinarians).

Consider how the following communities and sectors all engage survivors with animals and how they can work collaboratively to support each other:

- Animal Welfare Services (e.g., animal shelters, animal protection)
- Animal Health Services (e.g., veterinary)
- Emergency/Transitional Housing
- GBV Survivor Communities
- First Responders (e.g., EMS, Dispatch)
- Official Language Minority Communities
- Indigenous Communities
- Rural and Remote Communities
- Mental Health Services (e.g., social workers, counsellors)
- Criminal Justice System (e.g., police, prosecutors)



Collaboration can involve relationships to:

Create off-site programs for animals

These programs can be a collaboration between IPV organizations and Humane Societies, rescues, boarding facilities, veterinary clinics, and other animal service organizations. A collaborative approach can offer IPV shelters that have neither the space nor capacity to become animal-friendly at this time a more inclusive solution to survivors. These programs can also be solutions for animals that may not be comfortable or feel safe in a shelter setting or for survivors that need some time to heal, physically and emotionally, while their animals are safely being cared for. It is important to acknowledge and consider that separating animals from their families can further traumatize survivors, children, and their animals, as well that animal shelters can be a stressful environment for animals.

Secure animal supplies

Organizations may consider working with a local pet food bank (which may be run by a local animal shelter or human food bank) to help connect the survivor with accessible food for their animal as they move forward from IPV shelters. Pet food banks offer animal food, and occasionally also offer resources that can help survivors support their animals as they continue their journey. [Humane Canada's National Pet Food Bank](#) offers more information about pet food banks and where to find organizations you might consider building partnerships with.

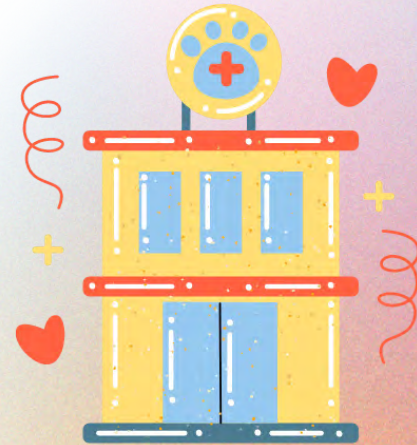
Support animal healing

Animals that experience or witness abuse may demonstrate new behaviour that can be challenging for the survivor to manage. Thus, a worthwhile partnership could be with animal trainers and behaviourists to support survivors and their animals in healing from the abuse they experienced and witnessed.

Many incredible organizations across the country are working collaboratively to support survivors of IPV and their animals. Their collaborative work is inspiring!

Promising Practice

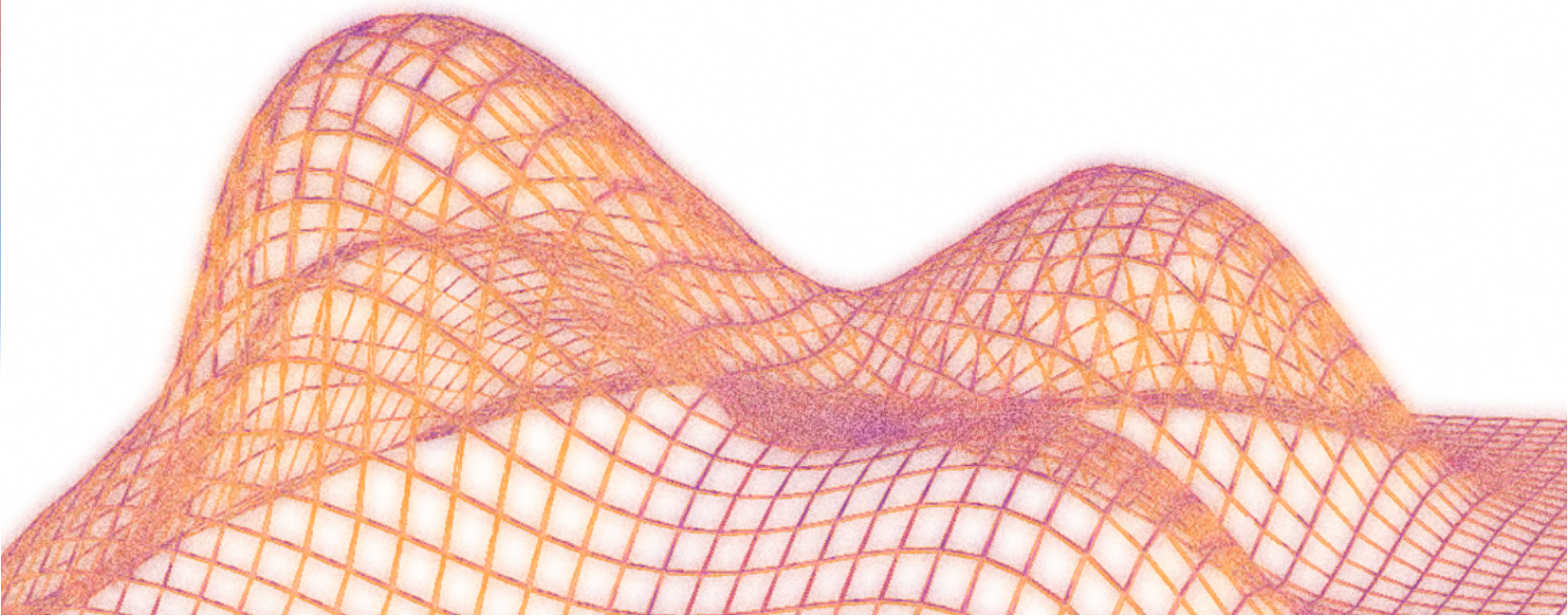
The [SaskSPCA](#) has been offering knowledge sharing and support to organizations in Saskatchewan, including in rural and remote communities, on how to initiate and sustain animal safekeeping programs to support survivors of GBV. SaskSPCA has launched a new resource: *Developing an Animal Safekeeping Program: A Resource Guide!* This Guide provides foundational knowledge, and context behind the 'why' and 'how' an animal safekeeping program may work within an animal welfare organization, such as a shelter, boarding facility, veterinary clinic, or foster-based setting. The complete Guide is available upon request. If you know an animal shelter, boarding facility, veterinary clinic, foster-based organization, or other animal welfare organization that may be interested in developing their own animal safekeeping program, please share this information with them or reach out to laura@saskspca.ca or tasha@saskspca.ca



Everyday Achievable Actions to Support Survivors with Animals

The following are everyday, achievable actions that service providers can adopt to support survivors with animals and work towards sustainable change in the gender-based violence sector:

- **Collect data on crisis or intake calls in order to assess the number of survivors with animals who call for support.** This can be as simple as collecting and reflecting on how many survivors have animals, or can extend to include more detailed questions such as whether an animal is a barrier to the survivor leaving, the number and type of animals they care for, or any other data your organization might find helpful to better understand the needs of survivors and their animals. This data can also help in applying for funding, demonstrating a need for a program for survivors with animals, and preparing for how many animals you may encounter if launching an animal safekeeping program.
- **Educate individuals within your organization about the barriers and challenges facing survivors with animals.** This could include training your staff about this issue, preparing resources to have on hand, and sharing available resources when survivors with animals contact your organization for support. It could also include informing your donors about the barriers that survivors of IPV with animals face, the lack of programs available to reduce these barriers, or the work your organization is doing to support survivors with animals. Additionally, you could advocate by utilizing your organization's social media to educate your audience through an awareness campaign.
- **Recognize your own capacity and scope, and take inventory of existing supports in your community.** It may be possible to work with an organization already supporting survivors with animals to expand or further support an existing program. Organizations can take steps to work differently with survivors with animals and offer whatever support they are able to if they can't start a program themselves. This may include researching possible local supports to be able to provide contacts or resources to survivors that need more information. It is also incredibly meaningful just to take the time to validate the strength of the human-animal bond and empathize with survivors about how difficult it may be for them when animal-friendly programs do not exist.





ACT (Awareness, Collaboration, Tools) Project for Women with Animals Experiencing Gender-Based Violence

Humane Canada's ACT Project began from the foundational work of the Canadian Violence Link Coalition and has been generously funded by Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada. There are three objectives for this project:

- Raise awareness and increase communication about the Violence Link among key sectors that engage with survivors experiencing GBV and safety planning.
- Develop and implement an adaptable, collaborative response model (ACT to Keep Families Safe) for survivors with animals experiencing GBV that can be adapted to underrepresented groups of women, including Indigenous women, Survivors, Official Language Minority Communities (OLMC), and Rural survivors.
- Provide education, tools, resources, and access to the ACT to Keep Families Safe model to sectors directly responding to survivors experiencing GBV, specifically through an online learning centre and regional workshops.

Engaging diverse voices from GBV organizations, social services, law enforcement, veterinary professionals, animal welfare, animal protection, Indigenous organizations, survivors of GBV, OLMC, and rural, remote, and farming communities, was integral to the success of this project. [Click here for a list of our partners.](#)

With partners, the ACT Project developed the ACT to Keep Families Safe model. This model was then shared for feedback in community conversations with Indigenous communities, survivor communities, official language minority communities, and rural, remote, and farming communities.

Get involved with us!

- Access the [ACT to Keep Families Safe online learning centre](#) that offers resources, tools, and educational modules that can help you further your work with survivors of GBV and animals. Additionally, the online learning centre has access to the ACT to Keep Families Safe model which offers a framework for supporting organizations in finding community based, collaborative solutions to support survivors with animals.
- [Sign up for our quarterly newsletter](#) which shares newly released resources as well as updates and resources from organizations partnered with the ACT Project.
- Join the ACT to Keep Families Safe Community of Practice which offers a space for professionals and champions working with survivors and/or their animals to come together for learning and networking opportunities.



Find animal friendly shelters in Canada through sheltersafe.ca



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