



# The Link:

Interpersonal Violence and  
Abuse and Animal Safekeeping



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**Prepared For:**

Saskatchewan Towards Offering Partnership Solutions (STOPS) to Violence  
Saskatchewan Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

**Prepared By:**

Melissa Wuerch – PhD Graduate Student, University of Regina  
Tracy Knutson – Saskatchewan Towards Offering Partnership Solutions (STOPS) to Violence  
Frances Wach – Saskatchewan Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals  
Rod McKendrick – Ministry of Justice, Victim Services  
Crystal Giesbrecht – Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan  
Naomi Beingessner – Community Research Unit, University of Regina  
Patricia Miller-Schroeder – Department of Women’s and Gender Studies, University of Regina

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# Acknowledgements

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The project entitled “The Link: Interpersonal Violence and Abuse and Animal Safekeeping” is the result of the participation, knowledge, and contributions of many people across Saskatchewan.

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This work builds on *Inside the Cruelty Connection: The Role of Animals in Decision-Making by Domestic Violence Victims in Rural Alberta*, released in 2012 by the Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. We thank them for their collaboration and support as we move forward with this work in Saskatchewan.

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- Tracy Knutson, STOPS to Violence
- Crystal Giesbrecht, Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS)
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- Naomi Beingessner, Community Research Unit, University of Regina
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For more information regarding this project or the connection between interpersonal violence and abuse and animal safekeeping, please contact Frances or Tracy at:

**Frances Wach, Saskatchewan SPCA**  
Ph: (306) 382-7722 or 1-877-382-7722  
E-mail: info@sspca.ca

**Tracy Knutson, STOPS To Violence**  
Ph: (306) 565-3199  
E-mail: stopstoviolence@sasktel.net

# Executive Summary

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According to Phil Arkow, Coordinator of the National Link Coalition, “When animals are abused, people are at risk. When people are abused, animals are at risk” (Arkow, 2013). This quote reflects the devastating reality that interpersonal violence and abuse and animal abuse rarely occur in isolation from one another. Through discussions with human service providers, animal welfare providers, and stakeholders in Saskatchewan, it became apparent that human service organizations and animal welfare agencies need to work together to address this connection. Thus, building on a recent project conducted by the Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Crawford & Clarke, 2012), two agencies, Saskatchewan Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Saskatchewan SPCA), representing animal welfare, and Saskatchewan Towards Offering Partnership Solutions (STOPS) To Violence, representing human services, created a partnership with the objective of enhancing the understanding of how concern for the safety of animals creates further barriers for individuals leaving situations of interpersonal violence and abuse within rural and urban regions of Saskatchewan. Following the established partnership, a project advisory team was formed, including representatives from the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Social Services, the Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS), and the University of Regina.

To gain a deeper understanding and to inform the development of an action plan for next steps in establishing and strengthening services among animal welfare and human service agencies, information was gathered to address two research questions:

1. Is the concern for the safety of companion animals and livestock a barrier to individuals leaving situations of interpersonal violence and abuse in Saskatchewan?
2. Are there existing networks and supports in Saskatchewan that provide safekeeping of animals for individuals leaving situations of interpersonal violence and abuse?

The project followed a mixed methods approach, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative portions. The first portion of the project took place between July of 2014 and August of 2015, and involved gathering online quantitative questionnaire responses. Responses were obtained from 39 animal welfare representatives and 56 human service representatives in both urban and rural regions of Saskatchewan. Service providers were asked about their experience with working with individuals leaving situations of interpersonal violence and abuse who had concern for animal care and safekeeping.

The second portion of the project took place between October and December of 2015. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with nine participants representing the knowledge and experience of human service and animal welfare providers. Utilizing thematic analysis, a number of important themes emerged. The quotes illustrated throughout the body of this report reflect the devastating barriers that individuals are faced with when seeking refuge from violence and abuse while having concern for animal safety and safekeeping.

As the current sample was not and could not be randomly selected, findings from this project cannot be generalized to the entire population of Saskatchewan; thus, the data presented below does not represent the beliefs and experiences of all human service and animal welfare providers in urban and rural regions of Saskatchewan. However, similar experiences and themes arose among human service and animal welfare representatives involved in this project, suggesting that these findings are valid and meaningful.

In response to the first question noted above, the findings indicate that concern for the safety of companion animals and livestock is a barrier to individuals leaving situations of interpersonal violence and abuse in urban and rural areas of Saskatchewan. When animal welfare representatives were asked if their agency had been requested to provide or facilitate temporary animal care or safekeeping for individuals leaving abusive relationships, 37.07% indicated experience with this. Of the remaining participants, 18.52% reported that although they had no experience with this, they were interested in learning more about providing support to individuals seeking options for animal safekeeping. When human service representatives were asked about their work experience, 95.92% reported that concern for the safety and safekeeping of animals largely impacts the decision making of individuals leaving abusive situations. In addition, 77.55% of human service participants knew of someone who did not leave an abusive relationship due to concern for the safety and safekeeping of animals. These findings suggest that while the majority of human service providers have firsthand experience with the safety of companion animals and livestock being a barrier to individuals leaving situations of violence and abuse, a discrepancy exists among the experiences of animal welfare and human service providers. This illustrates the need for collaboration among both sectors.

Service providers who participated in the qualitative interviews identified several issues and challenges regarding interpersonal violence and abuse and animal safekeeping, and how this greatly affects the lives and decision making of individuals. Service providers discussed that animals are often used as a method of control to prevent individuals from leaving situations of interpersonal violence and abuse. Stories were told regarding the exertion of control over victims and children through threats to harm or kill animals. In addition to animals being used as a method of control, service providers discussed that options for animal care and safekeeping are difficult to access, and because of this, individuals may delay leaving abusive situations. Fear regarding the negative repercussions of leaving animals behind may prevent individuals from seeking safety for themselves and their animals. In these situations, victims will often put themselves in danger in order to ensure that their animals are being properly taken care of. Other challenges discussed included the short-term nature of animal care and the lack of financial resources, as well as the lack of awareness about services available. The discussion of rural regions brought to light unique challenges, including concerns with confidentiality and the issue of people's livelihood being dependent on larger animals. Furthermore, individuals and children fleeing situations of violence and abuse are often attached emotionally to their animals, and these animals provide emotional support and enhance coping in situations filled with stress, turmoil, and uncertainty.

In response to the second question regarding existing networks and supports in Saskatchewan that provide safekeeping of animals for individuals leaving situations of interpersonal violence and abuse, a valid and reliable conclusion can be made based on the knowledge and experience of service providers. While there are some existing services and programs available that provide safekeeping options for animals and livestock when individuals are leaving situations of violence and abuse, these programs contain several challenges and limitations that may delay or prevent individuals from seeking safety when faced with the overwhelming concern for animal care and safety. Among the animal welfare representatives who participated in the present study, 76.92% reported no current collaboration or partnership among their agency and domestic violence services. When asked if there is adequate access to animal safekeeping supports to assist individuals in successfully leaving abusive relationships, 73.08% held the opinion that there was not adequate access to supports in their area. Participants were asked about promising practices related to animal safekeeping and interpersonal violence and abuse, with 40.0% indicating awareness of current programming, including PetSafe Keeping Program (Calgary Humane Society), Safe Places Program (Regina Humane Society), and an emergency shelter (offered through the Saskatoon SPCA).

Among the human service representatives who participated in the present study, 53.33% reported no collaboration among their agency with animal welfare organizations. When asked if there is adequate access to animal safekeeping supports to assist individuals in successfully leaving abusive relationships, 58.33% held the opinion that there is not adequate access to animal safekeeping supports in their area. Participants were asked about promising practices related to animal safekeeping and interpersonal violence and abuse, with 45.0% indicating awareness of current services, such as PetSafe Keeping Program (Calgary Humane Society), Swift Current SPCA, Safe Places Program (Regina Humane Society), animal kennels or rescue shelters to aid in finding animal foster homes, and Noah's Animal House based in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In the qualitative interviews, participants discussed a noticeable gap in the lack of awareness regarding current resources, services, and programs within the community that are available for animal care and safekeeping in situations involving interpersonal violence and abuse. Service providers suggested that more education, awareness, and programs are needed, in addition to establishing partnerships between animal welfare agencies and human service organizations. Participants suggested developing and implementing more program options that offer financially realistic and appropriate resources. Finding creative ways to increase the amount of space, foster families, and volunteer capacity was noted. The importance of interagency collaboration and thinking outside the box may lead to positive change.

Based on the information gathered, a list of recommendations was created:

- ❖ Develop education and training workshops regarding the connection between interpersonal violence and abuse and concern for animal safekeeping for human service organizations, animal welfare agencies, and the general public.

- ❖ Establish partnerships between animal welfare agencies and human service organizations to better provide services.
- ❖ Provide information about services available for both animal welfare and human service providers in urban and rural areas.
- ❖ Train service providers in supporting individuals to plan for animal safekeeping when leaving situations of violence and abuse.
- ❖ Create a list of resources and services for animal care and safekeeping currently offered within Saskatchewan (e.g., develop a resource book, provincial registry).
- ❖ Among domestic violence services, ensure that the intake process involves asking whether or not animal abuse is occurring/has occurred within the home.
- ❖ Formulate policies among animal welfare and human service organizations, to ensure a clear understanding of what each sector is responsible for. Establishing guidelines will remove ambiguity that may arise when working in collaboration.
- ❖ Generate specific and focused action plans for individuals leaving situations of interpersonal violence and abuse who are concerned about animal care and safekeeping, in both urban and rural regions of Saskatchewan.

In summary, this report offers important knowledge regarding the barriers for individuals leaving situations involving interpersonal violence and abuse, who have concern for animal care and safekeeping. The information gathered throughout this project offers increased knowledge and insight, and has instilled hope that much can be done to assist individuals leaving situations of violence and abuse to ensure the safety of both humans and animals. A collaborative spirit among animal welfare agencies and human service organizations is imperative, which will lead to positive change within the community at large.

**Full Report can be found on the following websites:**

- Saskatchewan SPCA: [http://sspca.ca/the\\_link\\_report/](http://sspca.ca/the_link_report/)
- STOPS to Violence: [www.stopstoviolence.com/resources-1/](http://www.stopstoviolence.com/resources-1/)
- PATHS: [www.pathssk.org/resources/paths-fact-sheets/](http://www.pathssk.org/resources/paths-fact-sheets/) Scroll down to find the article titled “The Link: Interpersonal Violence and Abuse and Animal Safekeeping”

