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Executive Summary

From September 2009 until April 2009, five Master of Social Work students from Carleton University conducted a research study titled *The Effects of Pet Ownership on Women's Experiences of Escaping Domestic Violence*. In partnership with the Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW) and the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (CFHS), the qualitative research finds that there is a need to offer support services to women and their pets; that barriers prevent women with pets from escaping domestic violence; and that solutions are needed to abolish such obstacles. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven shelter workers and one shelter user from the Ottawa area. The following is a synopsis of the study.

Thematic Findings from the Literature:

- Women delay leaving abusive relationships for fear that their pet(s) may be harmed
- Abuse against women is simultaneous with pet abuse
- Children who witness pet abuse may become abusers
- Pets are important family members who also require protection

Thematic Findings from the Researchers:

- **Needs**
 - a. Therapeutic support – pets offer therapeutic support to women who have experienced loss and may prevent women contemplating suicide, from completing the act.
 - b. Formal support – women with pets need more community resources when escaping domestic violence (i.e. A structured safe pet program as well as support from vets and kennels).
- **Barriers**
 - a. Structural – bi-laws (food and allergy policies), cultural sensitivity, and financial barriers prevent women with pets from accessing shelters.
 - b. Accessibility of safe pet program – financial costs and pet safety create structural barriers.
 - c. Pets as pawns – women delay leaving abuse because the abuser threatens to harm the pet if the women leaves or has left and is not willing to return.
- **Solutions**
 - a. Formal/Informal Support – informal supports such as family members, friends, or shelter workers may care for pets.
 - b. Future Directions – On-site animal shelters; boarding kennels; foster care for pets as an alternative to caging.

Ideas for Future Research:

The limitations of this study were the complications finding participants, particularly because of gatekeeping and working with a transient population. Furthermore, only one female survivor was interviewed in this study and seven shelter workers. A more comprehensive understanding of this issue is necessary in order to depict the larger population of persons who require shelter for themselves and their pets (i.e. male, youth, and homeless populations).

Moreover, the vast majority of shelter workers interviewed identified the need for accessibility to a pet safety program in the Ottawa area so women who experience domestic violence have one less fear and loss in their lives. The effects of pet ownership on women escaping domestic violence are complex and play an important role in ending violence against women.

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