

12 MAY, 2021

The unseen victims of violence



Hobart Mercury, Hobart

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Pets are often used by abusers in domestic violence situations to manipulate and control their victims. Laws need to change to protect our animals, says **Jan Davis**

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A WOMAN'S decision to leave a violent and abusive relationship is a complex process. She first needs to consider the risks to her and her children. Paradoxically, taking that step towards safety is also the time of greatest danger of homicide, sexual assault and increased violence.

Pets and service animals are also a part of the lives of many families. This means they are an important part of the decision-making process when women consider leaving a violent situation.

Seventy per cent of women fleeing domestic violence also report pet abuse, and it's another reason many victims delay leaving. They fear the animal who has provided love and support when they need it most will be neglected, or they won't be fed or cared for. Worse, they are worried their animals will be killed.

And these fears are real.

Violence towards pets is a really strong indicator that people will also be violent towards the humans in their

life.

Animal abuse often is linked to the severity of domestic violence, and individuals who commit pet abuse are more likely to inflict physical and mental violence on other family members.

Many jurisdictions are recognising these facts and changing legislation to include animals in family violence laws.

More than two-thirds of US states have already enacted legislation that includes provisions for pets in domestic violence protection orders.

Last year, NSW laws were amended to include harm, or threats of harm, to an animal in the definition of intimidation. This means perpetrators can also be charged with domestic violence offences when animals are used to coerce the victim. The changes mean that protection of animals will also be made standard in domestic violence orders.

The Victorian parliament is considering a motion which proposes that animals should

be recognised as victims of family violence, which would result in similar provisions to those now in place in NSW.

Sadly, despite all this evidence, Tasmania is falling behind. It is time for our government to follow step and adopt changes in legislation that recognise animal abuse as a form of family violence.

As well as these basic amendments, changes will also need to be made in other areas. Pets need to be recognised as family members in the eyes of the law, because at the moment they are only

considered as property. Often, women feel like they have to stay in violent relationships because their pet is registered to the male in the family.

In these circumstances, ownership of the pet should automatically move to the person trying to flee that situation.

Abusers often use pets to manipulate and control their victims, but very few women's refuges allow animals.

Changes will be needed to short stay and emergency

accommodation regulations to allow people to escape fraught situations with their pets. This is a particular issue in rural communities where it is difficult for victims of domestic violence to move away from an abusive situation, and to become invisible to their abuser. There also needs to be more support for safe haven refuges for women, their children and their pets.

These measures would be an important step towards improving support and so the safety of victim-survivors when animals are also caught up in family violence. When women know their pet will be safe, it allows them to take care of themselves and their children. And the safety of vulnerable Tasmanians should be of paramount importance to all of us.

Jan Davis is chief executive of RSPCA Tasmania.

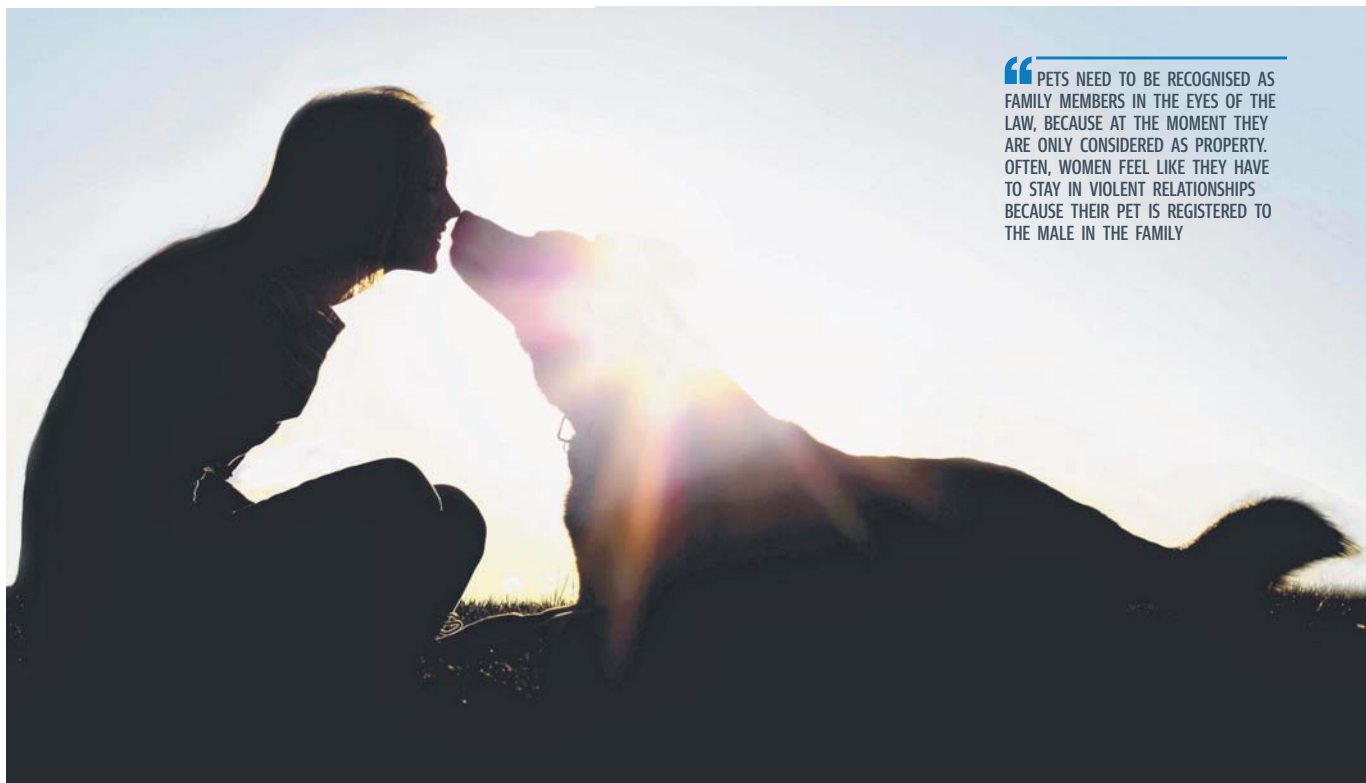
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