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Natasha Stott Despoja AO,
Commissioner,
Royal Commission into Domestic,
Family and Sexual Violence
GPO Box 464
Adelaide SA 5001

27 September 2024

Dear Commissioner Stott Despoja,

Re: Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

Lucy's Project is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (the Commission). Please accept this document as Lucy's Project's submission to the Commission.

About Lucy's Project

Lucy's Project is a national charity that aims to improve the safety and wellbeing of people and animals impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV). Lucy's Project collaborates and builds partnerships across sectors, advocates for policy, program and legislative changes, undertakes and promotes research, and delivers education for services and workers.

Lucy's Project believes the following:

1. People and animals have a right to be safe from violence.
2. The safety of people and animals is interconnected.
3. People and animals should be supported to heal and recover together.

These principles are incorporated into our vision: Safe families, paws and all.

The co-occurrence of animal abuse and domestic, family and sexual violence

There is growing recognition that animal abuse and DFSV commonly co-occur (Kotzmann et al., 2022). One of the reasons for this co-occurrence is that perpetrators of DFSV may threaten, harm, and kill animals to control and intimidate people (Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Oosthuizen, 2023). This use of animals to instil fear and enforce control creates ‘interlocking systems of companion animal abuse, child abuse and family violence’ (Jegatheesan et al., 2020, p.3). Further, animal abuse can be an indicator of future, frequent, or more severe forms of intimate partner violence (Butler & McDonald, 2024; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018). Therefore, this submission recommends the implementation of an animal-inclusive DFSV framework to increase the safety and wellbeing of people and animals impacted by DFSV and asserts that identifying and addressing animal abuse is a critical and, often, overlooked early intervention measure for reducing violence against people.

What is an animal-inclusive domestic, family and sexual violence framework and why is it important?

An animal-inclusive DFSV framework recognises that consideration must be given to the safety and wellbeing of animals impacted by DFSV in order to support both people and animals. 69% of Australian households share their lives with animals, and it is common for people to regard animals as treasured family members (Animal Medicines Australia, 2022). Research indicates that people impacted by DFSV commonly ‘view their companion animals as members of their family’ (Giesbrecht, 2022, p.16933). Crucially, when an individual is unable to take an animal with them or ensure their safety, concern for the animal’s wellbeing may become a barrier to help seeking or leaving a violent partner (Ascione et al, 2007; Giesbrecht, 2022). Indeed, concern for the wellbeing of an animal may contribute to a person’s decision to return to a violent partner after a period of separation (Barrett et al., 2018 in Taylor et al., 2020). Nobody should ever be compelled to make a choice between their own safety and the safety of animal family members. Further, women and children impacted by DFSV should not be expected to surrender animals to access support, such as accommodation services. When faced with a potential loss or separation from an animal, an individual can experience ‘considerable distress’ (Montgomery et al., 2024). Forced separation from an animal, such as that endured by people impacted by DFSV, ‘may lead to feelings of intense grief, guilt and trauma, and a decline in psychosocial functioning’ (Walsh, 2009 and Lowe et al., 2009 in Montgomery et al., 2024). People in rural, regional and remote areas endure additional barriers to accessing safety and support for themselves, their children and their animals, particularly in circumstances where their animals are also a source of financial security (Wuerch et al., 2018).

Periodically, Lucy’s Project receives correspondence from individuals and service providers requesting information about animal safekeeping, often after exhausting all local options. The following de-identified excerpts clearly demonstrate the bond that people have with their

animals, the concerns for their safety and wellbeing, and a desire to not be separated from them:

'I recently left my ex-partner due to domestic violence. I have had to relocate with my children and cat. We are trying very hard not to rehome or surrender him as we feel we have already lost enough to keep us safe and cannot bear the thought of losing him as well.'

'I left a DV relationship last year and had to move in with a family member. A friend has been looking after my dogs but is unable to continue to do so due to a change in their circumstances. I have had both dogs since they were puppies. I have contacted a lot of organisations but no one is able to foster them. I can only get help if I choose to surrender them, and I do not want to do that as they are like family to me.'

'I am about to flee domestic violence and I need somewhere for my beautiful dog and cat to go for a short period while I escape as I am scared of what might happen if I leave them behind'.

'I am desperately trying to get my dog minded so I can stay in a refuge with my son. She is a beautiful terrier and so friendly. I've been living in my van to keep her, but my ex-partner keeps finding me.'

Moreover, an animal-inclusive DFSV framework acknowledges that animals impacted by DFSV are also victim-survivors, not merely adjuncts to their human family members' experiences of violence. In fact, animals may be the 'first target' of a perpetrator of DFSV and, therefore, it is essential that they are protected (Kotzmann et al., 2022, p.190). A recent paper by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) titled *Violence against family animals in the context of intimate partner violence* highlights the need to improve 'access to crisis and support services that accommodate both human and animal needs' (Butler & McDonald, 2024, p.10).

Lucy's Project addresses the following issues identified in the Commission's *Issues Paper*: Early intervention, response, and healing and recovery. This section highlights service responses and legislative changes that are required to enhance the safety and wellbeing of people and animals impacted by DFSV.

Early intervention and Response

In its first submission to the Commission, Embolden (2024) discusses the importance of building the capacity of universal and non-specialist services to identify and respond to those at risk of experiencing DFSV. Because animal cruelty and interpersonal violence are 'closely related' (Mota-Rojas et al., 2022, p.1), Lucy's Project recognises that practitioners who provide animal welfare and veterinary services are well-positioned to identify and respond to

human and animal victim-survivors and those at risk of experiencing DFSV. Specifically, animal welfare workers, such as animal cruelty inspectors, and veterinary professionals can provide an effective pathway to safety and support if they are trained and resourced to recognise, respond to, and refer victim-survivors of DFSV and animal abuse.

A systematic review of international research about the role of veterinarians ‘in responding to [DFSV] involving animals’ found that a significant percentage of veterinarians have awareness about the link between DFSV and animal abuse (Monsalve et al., 2017 in Paterson et al. 2024, p.3). Despite this awareness, however, most do not receive training about how to respond in situations of DFSV and animal abuse and, subsequently, are not intervening (Monsalve et al., 2017 in Paterson et al., 2024). To address this reported gap in competency, a Melbourne-based specialist domestic violence service undertook a pilot program, Vet-3Rs, to equip veterinary professionals with the skills to recognise, respond to and refer victim-survivors of DFV that they encounter in their work (Paterson et al., 2024). Researchers who evaluated the Vet-3Rs training program concluded that veterinary professionals may be ‘an under-utilised asset in domestic violence prevention and response measures’ and acknowledged the potential for veterinary professionals to provide early intervention for people and animals subjected to domestic and family violence (Paterson et al., 2024, p.10).

Recommendation 1: Fund and implement a statewide education program for animal management, animal welfare workers and veterinary professionals to equip them to recognise, respond to, and refer human and animal victim-survivors of DFSV and those at risk of experiencing DFSV.

Response

Emergency, crisis, transitional, and longer-term housing

As discussed earlier, many people regard companion animals as family members, therefore, when seeking access to accommodation services, people impacted by DFSV may not want to be separated from their animals. Furthermore, if their animal has been threatened or harmed by a perpetrator of DFSV, an individual may ‘fear for the animal’s wellbeing if they leave them behind’ (Giesbrecht, 2022, p. 16933). It is common for people impacted by DFSV to delay leaving a violent partner if they cannot ensure that their animals will be safe (Ascione et al, 2007; Giesbrecht, 2022). Therefore, the provision of animal safekeeping services is essential for enhancing the safety of women and children impacted by DFSV.

Ideally, human and animal victim-survivors should have access to accommodation that allows them to remain together. In Victoria, it is recognised that ‘the phasing out of communal refuges and moving towards a core and cluster model [of accommodation] has increased the capacity of the refuge system to accommodate victim-survivors with family animals’ (Wilson, 2023). This type of accommodation typically consists of separate, self-contained residences

(the 'cluster') that are connected to a communal area consisting of onsite support (the 'core') (Land and Housing Corporation, n.d.). In New South Wales, core and cluster accommodation is designed to include 'communal and private spaces that are flexible, inclusive, and diverse to cater to women and children of all ages and pets of all types' (NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 2022, p. 21).

If human and animal victim-survivors are unable to be accommodated together, it is essential that animal safekeeping services are provided off-site to ensure that animals are safe, and that people impacted by DFSV do not feel compelled or forced to surrender their animals. The *Supporting victim-survivors of family violence with family animals* (Wilson, 2023) guidelines discuss the importance of facilitating visits between human and animal victim-survivors when animals are being accommodated by safekeeping services, wherever it is safe, beneficial, and practical to do so. Where visitation is not possible, it is recommended that a 'mechanism for victim-survivors to check on their family animal's wellbeing' be implemented, such as photos, videos, and/or a scheduled 'wellbeing update' (Wilson, 2023, p. 14).

Moreover, it is imperative that rental tenancy laws and regulations do not create barriers for people and animals who are impacted by DFSV and are seeking prompt access to safe private rental accommodation.

Client-intake

The DFSV services sector can improve its animal-inclusivity by asking questions about animals during client intake processes. For example, standard questions about family or household composition provide an opportunity to ask clients whether they have animals in their care, including companion, assistance, and farmed animals. Where appropriate, follow-up questions could inquire about the safety and wellbeing of those animals and clarify whether referrals are required for services such as animal safekeeping, veterinary services, and/or assistance with safety planning.

Risk assessment and safety planning

All DFSV risk assessment processes must include questions about violence and threats towards animals to ascertain whether people, including children, have been exposed to animal abuse. However, it is vital that this assessment is not limited to companion animals. Narrow questions about companion animals (or 'pets') may fail to elicit information about violence perpetrated against assistance, farmed, and wild animals with the intention to intimidate, coerce or dominate people, including children.

Any safety planning undertaken with people impacted by DFSV must also consider the safety of animals in their care in recognition that animals also deserve protection from violence and to ensure that concern for an animal's wellbeing does not become a barrier to safety.

Data

In its first submission to the Commission, Embolden concludes that ‘key insights’ may be elusive because the DFSV sector ‘has extremely limited capacity for data collection and analysis, monitoring, evaluation and reporting activities’ (2024, p.12). Further, this limitation has the effect of impeding ‘innovation and opportunities for improvements through service and system change’ (2024, p.12). It is apparent that key insights that may be hidden by a lack of effective data collection are the demand for animal safekeeping and the incidence of animal abuse occurring in the context of DFSV, resulting in animals being made invisible despite their experiences of DFSV. The invisibility of animal victim-survivors of DFSV has a flow-on effect for the safety and wellbeing of both people and animals, the provision of services, and funding decisions. It is essential that data is collected by government and non-government DFSV services to reflect the demand for animal safekeeping services, whether or not a request can be met. Moreover, it is vital that DFSV services have the capacity to capture data - and report - on the ancillary or unfunded services that they provide to animal victim-survivors, such as brokerage for veterinary fees or transport of an animal to a safekeeping service.

Coordination and information sharing

Collaboration between law enforcement, animal welfare organisations, and DFSV services has been recognised as an effective strategy to strengthen responses to people impacted by DFSV (Butler & McDonald, 2024). For example, RSPCA QLD and Queensland Police Service have formed ‘a strategic partnership in the detection, response to, and investigation of animal cruelty and domestic and family violence’ (QPS Media, 2023). It is recognised that information sharing in cases of serious animal neglect and/or cruelty may provide ‘a potential indicator of, or precursor to, DFV’ (QPS Media, 2023).

Legislation

The *Intervention Orders (Prevention of Abuse) Act 2009* includes ‘causing the death of, or injury to, an animal’ as an example of emotional or psychological harm [Part 3 Div 1. 8. (4) (d)]. However, the legislation omits *threats* to harm an animal as an example of emotional or psychological harm. Domestic and family violence legislation in Victoria and Queensland recognises that ‘...threatening to cause the death of, or injury to, an animal...so as to control, dominate or coerce’ a person constitutes domestic and family violence [*Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) Part 2. 5 (2) (e); *Domestic and Family Violence Act 2012* (Qld) Div 2. 8 (3) (g)]. This broader definition recognises that a person’s threats to harm an animal can be part of a pattern of coercive control. In addition, anticipated violence against an animal can negatively impact a person's physical and psychological wellbeing (Butler & McDonald, 2024).

Recommendation 2: To embed an animal-inclusive DFSV framework in relevant government departments, agencies, services, strategies and plans to increase the safety and wellbeing of people and animals impacted by DFSV.

Recommendation 3: Additional funding and resourcing for DFSV services to enable them to provide safekeeping services (on-site and/or externally) for animals. This includes services

that provide emergency, crisis, transitional and longer-term housing to people subjected to DFSV.

Recommendation 4: To implement a requirement for DFSV services to capture data about their clients' animals and the services provided to animals. For example, this could include keeping records about the number of requests for animal safekeeping services (regardless of whether those requests could be met) and the number of animals that clients report having been subjected to abuse. That the full implementation costs, such as updates to database systems and staffing resources, are met by funding bodies.

Recommendation 5: That data is collected by government and non-government services on the number of people impacted by DFSV who were turned away from a service, or who chose to decline a service, because services were unable to support or accommodate their animals.

Recommendation 6: The provision of training and resourcing for DFSV, homelessness, community, child and family, health, legal, law enforcement and other services to identify and respond to people and animals who have been subjected to animal abuse in the context of DFSV.

Recommendation 7: To consider the development of a strategic information sharing partnership between law enforcement, animal welfare organisations and DFSV services with the aim of increasing the safety of people and animals impacted by DFSV.

Recommendation 8: Funding for research on the link between animal abuse and DFSV, with the aim of improving prevention, early intervention and response strategies.

Recommendation 9: Amend the *Intervention Orders (Prevention of Abuse) Act 2009* to include the following as an act of domestic and family violence: threatening to cause the death of, or injury to, an animal whether or not the animal belongs to the person to whom the behaviour is directed so as to control, dominate or coerce the person.

Recommendation 10: Amendments to DFSV legislation to recognise animals can be victim-survivors of DFSV and are entitled to safety and protection from harm.

Recovery and healing

Lucy's Project affirms the importance of the human-animal bond and believes that people and animals should be supported to maintain their connection wherever possible. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) defines the human-animal bond as 'a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviours considered essential to the health and wellbeing of both' (AVMA, 2023 in

Montgomery, et al., 2024). It is recognised that there are benefits for both people and animals when they are supported to heal and recover together. For instance, the human-animal bond promotes physical and mental health improvements and assists people to recover after a crisis (Oosthuizen et al., 2023).

When they are separated from their animals, children can experience socio-emotional distress, such as grief, anxiety, and fear (Butler & McDonald, 2024). For children who have experienced frequent trauma, their animal companions may provide a sense of security, relieve their stress and support them to heal emotionally (Jegatheesan et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential that DFSV services are resourced to enable them to facilitate and maintain the connection that children have with their animals. Further, a child's physical and psychological wellbeing is negatively impacted when their beloved animal companion is subjected to violence (Butler & McDonald, 2024). It is vital that specialist support services are provided to children and young people who have been exposed to violence against animals in their home.

Providing for the safety and protection of animals validates the love and care that adults and children have for their animals and supports the human-animal bond. Moreover, the provision of services to animals, such as safekeeping, assists people to access safety and to heal and recover from DFSV (Taylor et al., 2020).

Whether they are a direct target of violence themselves or have been exposed to violence in the home, animal victim-survivors are likely to display behaviours that indicate they have experienced trauma. Studies demonstrate that animals 'can exhibit similar reactions to violence as humans [including] anxiety, depression, hyper vigilance, [and] acting out...' (Taylor et al., 2020, p.33). These health impacts may create further barriers for women and children who are seeking safekeeping services for their animals (Butler & McDonald, 2024). Further, the cost of accessing veterinary and rehabilitation services for their animals may be prohibitive for many people who have been impacted by DFSV.

Recommendation 11: Funding and resourcing for the DFSV sector to support people and animals to find safety, and heal and recover together.

Recommendation 12: The provision of specialist support services for children and young people who have been subjected to DFSV, including in cases where violence has been perpetrated against animals.

Recommendation 13: Funding for the provision of safekeeping and veterinary services for animals who are harmed or injured by perpetrators of DFSV.

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