BEST PRACTICES IN ANIMAL CRUELTY INVESTIGATIONS

Investigators should pay close attention to animal abuse cases, since they can often indicate the presence of other crimes.

By April Doherty and Martha Smith-Blackmore, DVM

Recently, roll-call training videos covering topics in animal abuse were released by the Humane Society of the United States in collaboration with the National Sheriffs’ Association. The videos are the perfect length for roll call, and cover some of the vital steps to take when law enforcement officers (LEOs) respond to a call for animal cruelty or dogfighting.

When responding to a scene, it is important to consider that animal cruelty may not be the primary reason for the call. In plain view, the LEO may observe a dog in a crate filled with feces after responding to an eviction call. They might respond to a call for arson and find a dog has been stabbed and burned by the suspect, similar to what might be seen in a murder case.

Most often, LEOs respond to a domestic violence call where the victim no longer wishes to cooperate, but the children in the home say that “Daddy hits Chloe [the dog], and Mommy, too.”

This is a common issue throughout the United States. Examples like these are important for law enforcement to be familiar with, because animals can be used as a “tool” or launching point for investigations. Throughout the country, pets are considered part of the family, and how they are treated often reflects how other members of the family are treated.

Consider this: In the U.S., it is more common for a child to grow up with a pet than two parents in the home. By asking questions about the pets, LEOs can develop...
a rapport with the victims, and in the
course of that conversation, the victims may
provide key information about other family
dynamics.

Recognizing the role of pets in the
family does not require the LEO to be an
animal lover. Instead, he or she must only
consider that the pet is considered a part of
the family, and use that information to the
benefit of an investigation. Additionally,
in some situations, crimes against animals
may be easier to prove, especially with the
involvement of a veterinarian to document
injuries to an animal.

Getting the facts
Best practices for animal cruelty investiga-
tions allow the facts of an incident to tell a
story. Remember from grade school: It’s the
who, what, where, when, why, and how that
matter. As with any investigation, these are
the questions that should be considered. The
crime scene for an investigation involving
animals shouldn’t be treated any differently,
even when there is a deceased animal.

Questioning should carefully establish
timelines of who did what, and when. This
will often refute stories suspects may tell to
justify an animal’s condition. For instance, an
animal cannot become emaciated over-
night, or even over a weekend. Attempting
to dispel the suspect’s statement that the
dog wouldn’t eat food, or even asking the
suspect which veterinarian they have taken
the animal to in the past, is important.

Subpoenaing medical records for the animal
often can reveal the truth of the suspect’s
story, too.

One of the advantages for law enforce-
ment is that since animal cruelty often affects
the community, neighbors and other
witnesses may be more than willing to
provide written statements, offer infor-
mation about the incident, and appear in
court—even multiple times. Interviewing a
witness who says that they had no idea
that the suspect had any pets can add to the
investigation, especially when the house is
covered in feces and there is no sign of an
animal in the yard.

Photos: the best evidence
A picture is worth a thousand words and
can provide some of the best possible
evidence in the investigation, especially
when the animal can be rehabilitated. When
a suspect offers a defense claiming it wasn’t
their fault the animal was in the condition
observed, photos from the scene compared
to 10 and 30 days later can reveal a starker
truth. Photos should always be taken from
multiple angles, even if the crime lab is not
available or able to respond.

Another good practice is to take photos
even if animal control takes the animal(s).

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Different perspectives can provide alter-
native details in the investigation. Photos
should be taken of the environment where
the animal was kept or found. Photos of
particular injuries should be taken in a series
of three: an overall picture of the animal, a
closer, “regional” photo to show in context
where the injury is on the animal, and then a
close-up of the injury itself.

Animal control should be contacted in
order to take possession of the “evidence,” as
animals are still considered property. Often,
a property inventory sheet can be completed
for the animal, and the animal control officer
can sign and take custody so that chain of
custody is also maintained. It is also essential
that a veterinarian examines the animal and
document any information that is necessary
to prove the case. Providing the veterinarian
with a copy of the police report, a verbal
account of what happened, and/or an oppor-
tunity to view photos from the scene will be
helpful for their exam, as well.

Veterinary forensics
Not all veterinarians are familiar with, or
comfortable with, performing veterinary
forensics—the process of documenting an
animal’s condition for the purposes of a
criminal investigation. The investigator can
reassure the veterinarian that the principles
of the exam are exactly the same as a typical
exam, but the information recorded in the
medical record may need to be more detailed
than usual.

It may be helpful for the investigator to
ask even the most obvious questions, such as
“Is this condition painful for the animal?” If
a veterinarian describes the animal as being
in pain, or says the animal would have been
in pain prior to death, ask them to articulate
their reasons for believing that to be the
case. Then encourage them to write their
findings in the medical record, based on the
animal’s behavior, response to pain medi-
cation, or the veterinarian’s knowledge of
similar conditions.

Personality-wise, veterinarians tend to be
conflict-averse, and this can translate to a
reluctance to assist in a legal investigation.
Some veterinarians may feel uncomfortable
playing a role in the criminal justice process.
Reassure a veterinarian that they are not
responsible for determining anyone’s guilt
or innocence; their job is only to carefully
document the animal’s condition. You may
ask them to express whether there could
be an innocent explanation for the animal’s
condition, but the veterinarian has no role in
determining who did what—that’s up to the
investigation.

The American Veterinary Medical
Association has a useful publication,
“Practical Guidance for the Effective
Response by Veterinarians to Suspected
Animal Cruelty, Abuse, and Neglect,” avail-
able for download at its website, avma.org.

In a deceased patient, full body radio-
graphs (X-rays) should be taken, if possible,
and the animal should be shaved prior to
the postmortem in order to better visualize
bruising and other injuries. Gunshot wounds
are a special exception to this advice, since
gunshot residues may be present in the fur
around the wounds.

If your department works regularly with
a particular veterinarian or veterinary prac-
tice, encourage them to learn more about
vetinary forensics. Being a relatively new
field, many veterinarians may be unaware of
the resources that are available to them to
help do a good job documenting a case. For
more resources, they can look to veterinary forensics textbooks, veterinary conferences that present continuing education lectures, and the International Veterinary Forensic Sciences Association.

The link to other crimes
Animal cruelty and dogfighting are illegal in all 50 states; however, many law enforcement officers are unfamiliar with the statutes or crimes, and they may not be a required learning for new recruits. Some LEOs may believe that all matters involving animals should be handled by animal control agencies, but it is important to always remember the link—or the theory—that animal cruelty is a crime that can be associated with other crimes against people.

While crimes against humans may not always be present, there is a high likelihood that they do exist. There are times when the link is apparent—for instance, when a child is raised in a home where Mom’s boyfriend beats both Mom and son. The son becomes an abuser of his girlfriend, eventually shoots and kills the family dog, and later sexually assaults the girlfriend when she breaks up with him.

The levels of unchecked violence can escalate. The presence of animal abuse doesn’t always dictate that an individual will become a serial killer, but there is that possibility. It is important to ensure that crimes against animals and crimes where an animal could also be a victim are investigated and treated as any other crime scene.

The Department of Justice has designated animal cruelty as a crime against society. Wherever animals are at risk of harm, so are people. We encourage you to view and share the roll-call videos to help improve animal and human protection.

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In a forensic investigation, shaving the body of a deceased pet may reveal a pattern of abuse.

Squalid conditions are often indicative of abuse and neglect.