

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Legal blog on all aspects of Family Law and Divorce in Massachusetts and Rhode Island

Protecting Yourself – and Your Pet – From Abuse

BY ROBIN M. LYNCH NARDONE • JUNE 10, 2024

Thirty-three percent of Massachusetts women and thirty-one percent of Massachusetts men experience intimate partner physical violence, intimate partner sexual violence and/or intimate partner stalking in their lifetimes. It is said that in nearly 88% of households with pets in which domestic violence exists, the pets are also being abused. Concern over the safety of pets often delays domestic violence victims from seeking help, causes them to return to their abuser, or prevents them from seeking assistance at all. Even in circumstances where the pet is not being directly abused, threats to abuse, kill or hide the pet will stop a victim of abuse from leaving. According to the MSPCA, as many as 48% of victims of abuse delay leaving a violent situation due to concern for a pet.

Thankfully, Massachusetts law provides protection for those with pets who have found themselves in abusive relationships.

Under M.G.L. c. 209A, the law gives a person suffering from abuse from a family or household member the ability to seek an order of protection and also entitles the individual to seek an order protecting a pet. The law provides that a court may give the victim "possession, care and control" of a "domesticated animal" that is owned by either party or a child living in the household. This means that even if the pet is owned by the perpetrator of violence, the victim can seek protection for the pet. In addition to giving the victim possession and control over the animal, the court can order that the abuser refrain from abusing, threatening or disposing of the animal. Obtaining a 209A Abuse Prevention Order that includes possession of the household pet can alleviate the fear of having to leave a beloved pet behind.

If you are the victim of domestic abuse and seeking help for yourself and your pet, there are resources available:

The National Domestic Violence Hotline
800-799-7233

Safe People Safe Pets Program Metrowest
617-999-3055

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Elizabeth Freeman Center in partnership with Berkshire Humane Society
413-447-7878 (Berkshire Humane Society)
413-499-2425 (Elizabeth Freeman Center)

MSPCA-Angell Safe Pet program
617-522-7400

Alianza
877-536-1628

Escape Grants/Red Rover
www.redrover.org

Sheltering Animals of Abuse Victims (SAAV)
Saavprogram.org

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