

The Justice Academy Journal

Law and Justice Executive Series

April 2017 - Volume 1



Rehabilitating Animal Abusers Through the Use of Technology

It was a hot summer day in Los Angeles. Outside temperatures approached 100°. A gentleman in his early 60's pulled up and parked in front of a busy city animal shelter. The man got out of his car, went inside, and asked a staff member if she could help lift his dog out of the trunk of his car. When the man opened the trunk, the staff member saw a medium-sized dog inside a sealed plastic bag. The worker lifted the dog out of the trunk, placed it on a rolling cart, and wheeled the cart into the medical room. Assuming there was no urgency, the veterinarian on duty went about tending to other animals. A few minutes later, she noticed that a section of the bag around the dog's mouth seemed to be moving. She quickly ripped open the bag and saw that the dog was gasping for air and appeared to be in the throes of dying. Horrified, the veterinarian tore open the rest of the bag. The dog's coat was filthy. Her body was severely emaciated and covered with deep sores that were bleeding and oozing pus. The veterinarian immediately euthanized the dog.

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The Justice Academy serves as a national repository and portal for instructional programs and specialized training materials that are produced by law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and the courts and makes these educational assets available to the general law enforcement community, at no charge.

JusticeAcademy.org also sponsors comprehensive research into a variety of issues relative to the law and justice professions, as well as authoring and advancing national strategic initiatives that deal with specific challenges. The intention of this service is to support professional development, personal advancement, and departmental competency of the law and justice community, as well as to serve as a mechanism for the proliferation of exemplary training resources nationwide.

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Outraged, she went out to look for the dog's owner, who was still in the lobby filling out paperwork. The veterinarian asked the man if he knew that his dog was alive when he wrapped her in plastic and put her in his trunk. The man said he did, and explained that he didn't want the dog to "mess up" the inside of his car during the ride to the shelter. After an investigation, it was determined that the owner knew his dog had been extremely ill for many months, but never took her to a veterinarian. As a result, the dog had suffered for a very long time. The owner told officers that he decided to bring the dog to the shelter because he didn't want her to die in his yard. The case was submitted to a local prosecutor and animal cruelty charges were filed.

This case is not an aberration. In fact, it's fairly typical of the type of animal abuse cases that prosecutors, bench officers, and law enforcement see on a regular basis. Although a good number of abuse cases involve people who have intentionally hurt or killed an animal, it's actually more common to see cases of "passive" cruelty (often called neglect). Some examples include:

- People who don't provide their animals with enough - or in some cases any - food;
- People whose animals are severely neglected or forced to live in unsanitary and dangerous conditions;
- Animals that are kept outside without proper shelter, and suffer or die as a result;

- People who leave their animals in hot vehicles;
- People who force dogs or roosters to fight for profit or entertainment; and
- People who don't take their animal for medical care when the animal is sick or injured.

Another common type of case involves "hoarding," which is a situation where a person takes in too many animals and, due to the high number of animals, the hoarder isn't able to provide the animals with the kind of care and attention they need. The situation is made worse when the hoarder fails (or refuses) to recognize that the animals are in a bad way and suffering, and doesn't seek help. Depending on the specific facts, certain cases of hoarding may be found to stem from mental illness.

At the heart of it, many of the behaviors in animal abuse cases are driven by a lack of empathy for animals, a failure to understand animals' needs (or what the law requires an owner to provide for his or her animals) and/or a complete lack of awareness that animals are capable of experiencing physical and psychological suffering. In some cases, neglectful or abusive conduct results from cultural-based beliefs about how animals should be treated. In certain parts of the U.S. and other countries, for example, activities such as dogfighting or cockfighting are considered to be an acceptable form of entertainment or sport.



Deborah Knaan , J.D.

Deborah Knaan was a prosecutor with the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office for 20 years. During her tenure, Ms. Knaan created and supervised the Office's first animal cruelty prosecution unit. Ms. Knaan served as a Los Angeles City Commissioner, overseeing and setting policy for the Los Angeles City Department of Animal Services. She later served as the Department's Assistant General Manager of Operations. Ms. Knaan has authored several pieces of state legislation, including a law that prohibits those convicted of certain animal-related crimes from having contact with animals for an extended period of time. Ms. Knaan regularly trains law enforcement and prosecutors on animal cruelty investigations and prosecutions. She currently serves as the Executive Director of Benchmark Animal Rehabilitative Curriculum.

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Often, “speciesism” may also be at play; while most people are inclined to believe that “domesticated” animals are sentient (able to perceive or feel things), there are many who don’t feel the same about farm animals, wildlife, or “livestock.” The idea that a pig can experience pain and suffering, or crave companionship like dogs and cats do, may not only be a concept that’s completely foreign to some, it may even sound ridiculous.

It wasn’t too long ago that some, if not all, of the abusive behaviors described above weren’t even considered to be criminal. Today, animal cruelty and animal neglect is against the law in every state, and enforcement of anti-cruelty laws is on the rise, both locally and nationally. Two examples illustrate law enforcement’s growing focus on animal-related crimes: First, in 2016 the FBI assigned a separate category for crimes against animals in its National Incident-Based Report System (NIBRS), and will now begin collecting detailed data about animal crimes from participating law enforcement agencies. By placing animal cruelty crimes into its own distinct category, the FBI can now accurately gather and analyze statistics on crime reporting and law enforcement’s response to animal cruelty calls. Another example that points to law enforcement’s intensified interest in animal cruelty crimes is the 2014 establishment of the National Law Enforcement Center on Animal Abuse. The National Sheriff’s Association created the Center in order to provide information about animal abuse to law enforcement, and promote law enforcement’s proactive involvement in the enforcement of animal abuse laws in their communities.

Law enforcement’s increasing interest in animal cruelty may be due, in large part, to the growing body of evidence that points to a definitive correlation between animal abuse and other crimes. This correlation is often known as “The Link,” a term coined by the National Link Coalition. The Humane Society of the United States points to studies that show that between 71%-83% of women entering domestic violence shelters reported that their partners also abused or killed the family pet, 65% of people arrested for crimes against animals had a history of assaults against humans, and that within 88% of the families being investigated for child abuse, animal abuse had also occurred. (1) Research has also shown that illegal animal fighting is associated with other crimes, such as assaults, gang activity, and narcotics violations.

Perhaps knowing that they’ll now find a sympathetic ear, members of the public are reporting animal cruelty with increasing frequency. Thanks to the audio and video recording capabilities of “smart phones,” civilian witnesses are now able to capture the actual abuse and neglect, which brings an animal’s suffering to life for both members of the criminal justice system and juries. Due to increased reporting, a better response rate, and more skillful investigations, prosecutors are now filing more cases of animal abuse every year. In fact, prosecutors’ offices around the country are starting to form special units specifically devoted to prosecuting animal abuse cases.

(1) (“Animal Cruelty and Human Violence: A documented connection.” (The Humane Society of the United States, http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/abuse_neglect/qa/cruelty_violence_connection_fa.html?credit=web. Accessed April 13, 2017.)

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All of this means that, at some point, most, if not all, members of law enforcement and the criminal justice system will likely end up investigating, prosecuting, defending, or presiding over an animal cruelty case. The problem is this: while the tools that are traditionally available to courts (incarceration, community service, fines, etc.) may be perfectly appropriate in some - even most - animal abuse cases, it is unlikely that any of these measures will actually cause the offender to think about and, more importantly, treat animals differently in the future. If the end goal is to prevent recidivism - i.e., actually reduce the likelihood that an animal abuser will still go on to mistreat more animals in the future - a more progressive approach is necessary.

Revisiting the case of the man we met at the beginning of this article (the owner who waited until his dog was close to death before wrapping her in plastic and driving her to the shelter) - what types of terms or conditions could have been ordered in that case to ensure the owner wouldn't repeat his behavior? The man honestly didn't think he was doing anything wrong. He told investigators that where he came from, when animals got sick, you left them alone and waited until they died on their own. That may sound hard to believe, but it is a sentiment that investigators and prosecutors hear so often, that it's probable there is some truth to the claim. Did this dog owner love his dog? In all likelihood, he did. For someone like this owner, all the fines and jail cells in the world won't bring him to a place we should all want him to be - a place where he understands what he, as an owner, is required to do for his animals and, just as importantly, the reasons why.

By failing to include some form of education as part of whatever other measures the criminal justice system takes against those who mistreat animals, we're virtually guaranteeing that nothing about the offenders' thoughts and attitudes toward animals will change. A system that punishes animal abuse offenders, but ignores the need for rehabilitation, means many will reoffend. If the criminal justice system desires to reduce the likelihood that offenders will repeat their abusive behavior toward animals, it's imperative that in most, if not all, cases of animal abuse, an educational component be included as part of the pre- or post-conviction terms or conditions.

Educating abusers about animals' needs, and what the law requires owners to provide for their animals, is a critical element of rehabilitation in animal cruelty cases. Many states in the U.S. have laws that either mandate, or recommend, that a person convicted of animal cruelty participate in some type of counseling, education, or treatment plan. Even if not mandated or recommended, educating a person about how and why animals should be treated humanely is probably the best chance we have at preventing that person from abusing more animals in the future. That said, until now there have been virtually no offender-oriented educational resources available to the criminal justice system on a national scale in animal abuse cases.

For almost 20 years, I was a prosecutor for the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office. For the last nine of those years, I supervised my Office's animal cruelty division. I would regularly get calls from prosecutors and animal control officers throughout the country, asking if I knew of a course or class to which they could send their animal cruelty offenders. The callers were all looking for a tool that would bring about positive and meaningful change in their offenders. Unfortunately, I was hard pressed to find anything appropriate to recommend. Recognizing that a real void existed, after leaving my position as a prosecutor, I launched a nonprofit and developed the Benchmark Animal Rehabilitative Curriculum (B.A.R.C.) course.

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The nonprofit B.A.R.C. is a unique online animal cruelty prevention course that is now available nationally. Similar to an online traffic school, B.A.R.C.'s curriculum is designed to educate people about what is required of them to be responsible animal owners and - more importantly - to instill empathy for animals by teaching and demonstrating that animals are capable of experiencing emotional and physical suffering.

B.A.R.C. is only available to adults and juveniles (15-17) who have been referred by a member of the criminal justice system, or other approved agencies. B.A.R.C. can be ordered as part of a pre- or post-filing diversion program, or as a term of probation.

B.A.R.C.'s underlying philosophy is that the most effective way to bring about real change in people who have mistreated animals is to shift the underlying beliefs and attitudes that drive the abusive behavior. Education is key to prevention, and in a world increasingly driven by technology and the Internet, education online is fundamental.

The nonprofit B.A.R.C. course utilizes text, videos, articles, quizzes, and a final exam to inform participants with a positive and engaging learning experience. The curriculum concentrates on increasing students' awareness of the value and needs of all sentient beings, as well as the potential consequences of failing to meet those needs. Other animal cruelty prevention experts, who agree with and are excited about this approach, have wholeheartedly endorsed the B.A.R.C. course.

With 16 classes, the curriculum covers a broad range of topics, such as intentional animal cruelty, neglect, illegal animal fighting, hoarding, and tethering. The course also addresses other important subjects, such as when discipline or training may cross the line and be considered cruelty, tethering, leaving pets alone in vehicles, why grooming is a necessity and not a luxury, and responsible pet ownership. More information about course topics and a detailed downloadable course outline can be found on the B.A.R.C. website.

One of B.A.R.C.'s most unique features is its use of the eProktor cutting edge facial recognition technology, which helps ensure that the person taking the course is the same person who was actually ordered to take the course. Other unique features include:

- Experts in the areas of animal cruelty prosecution, animal law, psychology, and humane education designed the course.

- 100% online, the course is available to students 24/7.

- Students can download their own progress reports and certificate of completion.

- The referral process is simple and easy; referrals can be submitted through the B.A.R.C. website or via email or fax.

B.A.R.C.'s curriculum is appropriate for many of the most common types of cases, such as those involving neglect, intentional cruelty, hoarding, and dogfighting or cockfighting. The B.A.R.C. course is educational in nature, and is not intended to be a substitute for mental health or addiction counseling or treatment. By providing those who have mistreated animals with the kind of information that will allow them to make better decisions and act more appropriately (not to mention lawfully), B.A.R.C. is a vital tool to help rehabilitate offenders and prevent animal abuse.



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