

Putting the Link to Work at the Local Level

Maine's Linkage Project moves beyond theory

By Tonya DiMillo and James Gemmell

The story in this article has been compiled from different but actual stories. Elements have been altered to protect the anonymity of the individuals mentioned.

Samantha knew that she needed to leave her husband. Her situation had gotten out of control and she was slipping into a deep depression. She and her children were suffering terribly, terrorized regularly in their own home. But so many things stood in the way of her leaving. How could she simply pick up her children and move them out of their home? Would her husband follow them? Where would she live? Where would the kids go to school? What would she do for money? And, most horrifying of all, what would become of her beloved Chocolate Lab, Rufus? Her dog was a great source of comfort in these miserable times, a true companion, and often a protector. Indeed, her husband seemed to recognize Rufus' value to Samantha. He had already savagely beaten the dog in a fit of rage. And, he had regularly threatened to kill Rufus if Samantha ever left.

Stories such as Samantha's, unfortunately all too common, are at the heart of the Linkage Project, an effort to create awareness, through training, policy, and practice changes, of the link between animal cruelty and human violence. Begun in Maine in the early 1990s, the Linkage Project grew from the efforts of many individuals in various fields: animal welfare groups, child welfare workers, public safety officials, justice officials, and others. These people had long realized that a link existed between animal cruelty and violence against people. They had witnessed it play out countless times in communities and homes across the state, but until then had not fully articulated or explored its implications at the individual-familial level or at the cultural-societal level. This link was particularly evident in domestic violence cases where pets existed as family members. Professionals responding to domestic violence cases had witnessed many situations like Samantha's ending tragically where human victims remained trapped in abusive relationships and their animals suffered horrible cruelty and death. So, the Linkage Project founders began to strategize a method for raising awareness of this link and ultimately come up with real solutions for helping people like Samantha and their pets.

The Linkage Project founders also knew that the link between animal abuse and human violence was not limited to cases of domestic violence but could be found in almost all cases where animals suffered abuse or neglect; cases of hoarding, cases where adolescents tortured animals, and other such situations. Raising awareness of this link and creating policy and practices that would

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address it would require a widespread education campaign, and not just in Maine, but across the country and around the world. Moreover, it would require groups of many different disciplines partnering and working together at the local level first, then at much broader state-wide levels.

The Linkage Project's mission was simple. It would bring together members of varied disciplines with the intention of:

- *making the public aware of the animal cruelty/human violence connection,*
- *changing public policy and practice to alleviate animal cruelty and human violence,*
- *training professionals who provide services to animals and people to recognize the link between animal cruelty and human violence,*
- *and finally, partnering and collaborating with all organizations involved in the well being of animals and people to develop pragmatic solutions to situations of animal abuse and human violence.*

In those early days as interest in the Linkage Project increased, the Project sought more extensive funding and an agency to host it. The Children's Advocacy Council of Cumberland County (CAC), a division of Youth Alternatives Ingraham, stepped in to fill this role. CAC received two grants from private foundations which would allow the Linkage Project to launch a state-wide campaign to spread awareness of and develop responses to the link.

The Project began its work by identifying organizations and agencies throughout Maine whose missions and agendas intersected around the well being of animals and people. The Project then offered general education and guidance on the Link to these organizations through a simple Power Point presentation or a more specialized training through a "train the trainer" curriculum. The Project successfully trained law enforcement workers, humane agents, direct care and social service workers, and foster parents. From January of 2006 through December of 2007, the Linkage Project provided general or advanced training to nearly 420 individuals.

During this period, discussion of the Linkage Project and its mission slowly found its way into public discourse. This heightened level of discussion was prodded by several simultaneous high profile and tragic cases of animal cruelty and neglect in Maine, including well publicized incidents of severe hoarding, and torture of animals by adolescent boys. Through publicity around these incidents, and public discussion of the Link, more and more individuals and organizations came forth wanting to become a part of the Project. This period saw the establishment of the first county committees. These committees, consisting of representatives of several different disciplines, had been part of the original Linkage Project plan put forth in its first grant proposal. As the number of county committees grew, the need for a state-wide advisory committee consisting of animal welfare and human service organizations became apparent.

The current Statewide Advisory Committee is comprised of key policy makers and state agency leaders, including representatives from:

- *The Animal Welfare Program of the Maine Department of Agriculture*
- *Maine Department of Public Safety*
- *Maine Department of Health and Human Services*
- *Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence*
- *Maine Federation of Humane Societies and Humane Society of the United States*
- *Ad Hoc Members: Commissioner of Public Safety and the Legislative Director of the Maine Department of Health and Human Services – both have expertise in the animal-human bond.*

Once the Statewide Advisory Committee was firmly established and given its membership of key leaders and policy makers, the guiding principles of the Linkage Project were slowly integrated into practice by several state agencies. Legislation and policy changes followed. These included legislation encouraging cross discipline reporting, whereby a social worker can alert an animal control officer to suspected animal abuse (such as a malnourished or injured pet) without breaching client confidentiality; legislation that would include pets in Protection from Abuse orders which became the basis for Maine's current law to protect pets from domestic violence; and legislation exempting animal control officers from civil lawsuits or criminal action when they report suspected child or elder abuse.

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While all of these legislative actions have had a great impact on furthering the Linkage Project's mission, the practice that may have had the most profound impact on cases of domestic violence where pets are present is the establishment of the Pet Questions.

Today in Maine, in the investigation of any case of domestic violence, child protection, adult protection, juvenile corrections, or human services agency workers – both government and community based – ask family members questions about their pets as part of an intake or assessment process. The questions are:

- *Are there pets in the home?*
- *How does each family member treat the pet?*
- *Do you worry about something bad happening to your pet?*

Prior to the integration of these questions, for most agencies in Maine, pets were not taken into consideration as members of a family unless they posed a danger to the visiting caseworker. Today, a wide array of intake forms for Maine services now ask about the family's pets.

The next step for the Linkage Project, now that it has established policy change at the state level, is to integrate the Link further into our communities, to take the Project's mission beyond awareness and policy change and into the realm of real-life practice and pragmatic solutions to the problems facing families and communities. This is where Community Partnerships for Protecting Children (CPPC) comes into play. Thanks to the Linkage

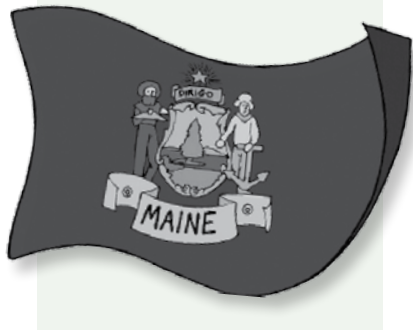
Project and to its membership in CPPC there is hope for Samantha, her children, and Rufus.

Samantha's story demonstrates just how deeply integrated animals are into the very fabric of our communities and families. The resolution of Samantha's family's problem, including Rufus' immediate safety and well being, requires a partnership of several different organizations in the community; domestic violence counseling, child welfare professionals, a safe haven for Samantha and her children during the crisis, job training, affordable housing, educational services, food pantries, veterinarians, pet foster care, police, day care, perhaps a faith based group to name a few. Organizations like these are partners in CPPC and while working together with Samantha for some stability in her life and the lives of her family, including Rufus, these organizations will find that in each of their missions is a connection to the Link.

CPPC began in three communities in Cumberland County, Maine, initially under a grant from a national child welfare foundation. Like the Linkage Project, it is administered by Youth Alternatives Ingraham. Its purpose, broadly, is to cultivate relationships with a broad range of people, organizations, and community institutions so that they may work in partnership to creatively address unmet family and community needs at a very local, grassroots level. Currently, there are more than 30 community partners involved with CPPC. When the Linkage Project was searching for a means of integrating itself with communities to find practical solutions for families like Samantha's, it made sense that it become a member partner of CPPC.

Today, animal welfare is formally integrated into the CPPC mission. Pets are included in all CPPC partner contracts, family case plans, safety and emergency plans, and treatment. A local animal welfare group regularly attends CPPC neighborhood team meetings and participates in social service provider meetings where individual family cases are discussed and practice changes are made. This partnership promotes best practice standards for animal-human bond and provides practical tools for early identification and prevention of animal abuse. Animal control officers, state humane agents and animal welfare representatives are soon to be working as part of the neighborhood multidisciplinary team of case workers, community policing agents, housing coordinators, in order to more efficiently and effectively identify and respond to individual cases of abuse and neglect.

The next step in the integration process of the Linkage Project's mission with CPPC is to increase the capacity for communities to respond when children or adults perpetrate or witness abuse towards animals. The Linkage Project has scheduled a statewide training for clinicians in the assessment and treatment of people who abuse animals or witness animal abuse using a nationally recognized curriculum. The Linkage Project is also developing a curriculum for humane education in the local schools and communities that



are CPPC partners. In addition, the Project is working to incorporate the Link into various social service programs' existing curriculums.

For Samantha, her children, her husband, and Rufus, this is good news. After she was able to gather her courage and approach a friend to tell of her problem, that friend contacted a CPPC partner agency in the

neighborhood, a social services provider. That agency quickly found temporary shelter for Samantha and her children at a local family crisis center, also a CPPC partner. The crisis center then worked with Samantha on an assessment of her family's needs. Their dog Rufus was included as a member of the family. A crisis team meeting was called. Samantha was included as a member of the team and together they found resources that would help Samantha map her way to her goal of independence and well being for her family. The team also developed a safety plan that included Rufus. The family crisis center contacted the local animal welfare agency, also a CPPC partner, to assist Samantha in establishing sole ownership of Rufus, obtain a pet protection order, and locate a pet foster home while she and her children continue to reside at the shelter. All CPPC resources will continue to support Samantha's family, including Rufus, as they slowly integrate back into the community. Samantha's husband was counseled and referred to a program for domestic batterers.

As the Linkage Project moves forward with its efforts to integrate its mission into communities and neighborhoods across the state, it brings lessons learned back to the state-wide advisory group for adjustment, policy review, legitimacy, and continued advocacy. For Samantha and her family, the Linkage Project in conjunction with CPPC was crucial. Today, she is looking toward the future with hope. She is certain that through CPPCs efforts to keep families intact and living in permanent housing in safe communities that Rufus, as an integral member of her family, will soon be home. There will be bumps in the road for sure, but she knows now that she will always have support.



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