



March 31, 2022

**To: House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women**  
**Re: Study on Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence in Canada**

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We are pleased to submit this brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women regarding intimate partner and domestic violence in Canada.

### **What is “The Link”?**

The “link” in our name refers to a body of research related to the “link” among four types of family violence: child abuse, animal abuse, elder abuse, and intimate partner violence. This research, in combination with the lived experience of survivors, indicates that these forms of abuse / violence tend to co-occur in families. When one is present, the others tend to be as well.

It is crucial that police officers / R.C.M.P., frontline workers, veterinarians, child protection workers, and the public understand that these forms of abuse and violence are all used interchangeably, and they all serve to keep a family in a cycle of abuse unless they are addressed holistically.

It is also crucial that the government provides financial support to established community organizations that fill a significant gap in service: providing pet-safekeeping services to survivors of intimate partner violence and human trafficking. Link Coalition Toronto (Link T.O.), a Toronto-based non-profit corporation founded in 2017, is one such organization. We have recently expanded to include management of and responsibility for the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association’s former program, SafePet Ontario (SPO). As of March 2022, we now proudly and actively run a pet-safekeeping program throughout the province of Ontario.

The need for our program has been clear from our inception five years ago. Link Coalition Toronto (since December 2017) and SafePet Ontario (September 2019 to August 2021, and March 2022 onwards) have accepted approximately 63 pets per year – which is approximately five pets per month or just over one pet per week. This does not take into account the significant number of requests we receive that cannot be accommodated due to lack of foster availability. Since taking over SafePet Ontario in March of 2022, weekly requests for our pet fostering services have increased by approximately 300%. We do not currently have enough fosters to house the number of requests we receive. There is an ever-



growing need for our work, but we cannot accommodate this increased number of requests without support from the Canadian government. Veterinary costs, program management costs, marketing costs, client transportation costs, and pet supply costs are overwhelming.

### **Link Coalition Toronto (Link T.O.) / SafePet Ontario (SPO)**

At Link Coalition Toronto, we highlight the human-animal bond as a significant, valuable relationship that an abuser can use against his / her victim to coerce and control them into doing what they would like. By threatening to harm or actually harming an animal that is within the family system (whether a pet, farm animal, or support animal), abusers know that they are targeting a source of love and comfort for their victim—this is exactly why they do it. If this is done in the presence of children, or even in earshot of children (as articulated in the *Divorce Act*), those children are vulnerable to perpetuating the cycle of abuse in the future. If an individual tries to leave their abuser but must leave the animal behind, their abuser will use this to force them to come back. They will send photos, text messages, voice recordings, and pass messages through friends, showing what they have done to the animal, or describing what they intend to do to the animal if the person does not return home.

For this reason, a significant portion of survivors of family violence will not leave their abuser if they cannot take their animal(s) with them to safety. Since most Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters, homeless shelters, and transitional houses do not permit animals onsite, we wanted to fill a significant gap in service by creating a fostering program for the pets of survivors of family violence. We did this in 2017. Though in the beginning we worked only with clients who intended to go to a VAW shelter, we now serve any individual (regardless of gender) who is a survivor of family violence or human trafficking. We foster their pets for up to one year, as it often takes this long for survivors to find stable, affordable housing, and to access additional mental health supports.

### **Our Mission**

Our mission is threefold:

- 1) **Educating professionals and the public about the “link”** among the four types of family violence mentioned above. We cross-train police and other professionals to encourage them to look outside their own area of expertise. For example, training child protection workers to look for signs of animal abuse, and training veterinarians to look for signs of domestic violence / elder abuse.



2) **Providing direct support to survivors of family violence** by caring for their pets while their humans find safety.

3) **Working collaboratively with related organizations to shift government policies and share resources.** We believe that we are all stronger if we work alongside one another, with the shared goal of ending family violence in this province. Link T.O. / SafePet Ontario is, above all, a coalition of service providers throughout the province. We believe in bringing community resources together to address “link” violence in our cities, provinces, and country. Link T.O. / SPO collaborates with police officers, Victim Services, veterinarians, Violence Against Women frontline workers, municipal animal services, mental health workers, humane societies, charities, academics, and many other sectors.

### **Community-Based Services, Supported by the Government**

No one organization exists that can “solve” the problem of family violence. It is a vast, insidious issue that is difficult for many people to discuss, let alone if it is happening to them in the privacy of their own home. We need a community-based approach so that there are as many doors open to safety as possible, in hopes that someone experiencing family violence will go through one of those doors and start a conversation that will get them and their loved ones to safety.

As a community, we need to be aware of the problem of family violence and the “link” because it is happening all around us, all of the time. The prevalence of elder abuse, child abuse, animal abuse, and intimate partner violence are in our communities is astounding—as all of the briefs submitted to this Committee have so carefully articulated. While a top-down government approach has specific benefits (namely, updated laws, providing funding, and implementing policy change), it is the people with their “boots on the ground” that are able to see what families in crisis truly need. These community-based solutions must be funded by the government; that is the only way we can continue to offer innovative, sustainable services to survivors of family violence.

When the founders of Link T.O. identified this gap in services in 2017, we were able to take our skills, experience, and networks to create an organization that serves a significant purpose. That is how our program developed: survivors said they would not leave without their pets, and we listened; shelters said they needed support for clients with pets, and we adapted; professionals were unaware of the ways the “link” could affect their clients, so we provided education and took action.



## **Lack of Funding**

Our program directly addresses issues of public safety, family violence, human trafficking, and community health, yet we funded entirely by donations from the public. *Link T.O. / SPO is run by three women who have full-time jobs elsewhere*—we cannot afford to have full time staff within our organization because accessing appropriate funding is laborious and challenging. In addition to work and family obligations, these three women run this vital community services in their “spare time”. It is unsustainable.

We believe that it would cost approximately \$300,000 per year to manage and grow this program as it truly should be managed and grown. We also believe that the Federal Government should make funding easily accessible to non-profit organizations that have a *proven record of providing safe, confidential, and sustainable services to survivors of family violence*. Link T.O. / SafePet Ontario is committed to training communities throughout Canada on how to create, establish, and sustain successful pet-safekeeping programs.

## **In Their Own Words**

In order to assist survivors of all ages in finding safety, we must consider their relationships with their pets. If we do not help the pets, we do not help the survivors. The need for services like Link Coalition Toronto / SafePet Ontario are immense and urgent. We believe our clients’ own words articulate the need most clearly. This is a sample of the feedback we receive on a daily basis from throughout the province. We have changed any identifying details to maintain the confidentiality of our clients.

### **Client A**

“Personally, I wouldn't have left without SafePet. I needed to know my pets had a safe place to go. As well, the program fostering my pets gave me some time to get back on my feet, and put my 'oxygen mask' on and do a bit of recovery work on myself after my experience. It also gave me time and room to find a new place to live and just become more grounded and settled. Knowing my pets were safe made all the difference.”

### **Client B**

“Dear Link T.O.: I am so very thankful for you and all you do to help people like me. Thank you for finding such an amazing foster for my cat, for ensuring that her diabetes was managed and that she was loved at a time when I couldn't take care of her. It's really hard to find someone who can take care of her with her medical needs. It was such a huge relief that



your organization took her in. I am so impressed with Link Toronto—from the updates, to the compassionate understanding, to the generosity. Thank you—from the bottom of my heart!”

#### **Client C**

“Thank you so much for your help in all this, and the families with such big hearts who helped take care of them. I'm honestly so grateful for the peace of mind while all this was going on, and for the chance to just get back on my feet here. No animal should be in a home where they're threatened to be punched or hit. I'm so appreciative of you in particular, and the program as a whole. I've started to feel like an actual person again, gain some confidence back, move forward in therapy and start re-building my life. I couldn't have done that without you and all of your hard work.”

#### **Client D**

“Thank you so much! My kids are so happy to have our dog back, they won't leave her alone lol. You helped ease a lot of worry and guilt once I knew she was safe. With my luck, I really thought there would be no available foster family for her and I couldn't believe when I heard she had a placement. You are our hero! Stay safe, take care!”

#### **Client E**

“I can never thank u enough for all the love and caring, and a safe loving home for him to be safe and some happiness and being taken care of with love.”

#### **Client F**

“Truly all this program has done for my dog, the expert care they gave and the kindness and compassion they gave not only me but my best friend – there are no words that I could thank them.

One year after I left [my dog] with the SafePet program I had finally gotten my own apartment, and I was anxious about seeing her again because I had not seen [her] in a year. I thought maybe [she] would have forgotten me. Well when she saw me, I called her name and she came running to me and would not stop kissing me. She was in perfect health, she's still kissing me today. I now live in a town that allows me to relax being away from [my abuser] and most importantly I have my best friend with me, making me laugh constantly.



Thank you from the bottom of my heart to everyone who played a part in making my life a happy one.

If this safe pet program were not available I would have lost the best support that I have in my life. Without her I would not look forward to my future, she keeps me on my toes looking up. It's amazing what a little 15lb bundle of fluff can do for your heart. I love her so much. From my heart, Thank you.

Just one more thing I know I could have gone to a shelter but leaving my dog and my daughter with this monster was something that terrified me because shelters didn't allow dogs and my daughter was afraid to go."

### **Client G**

Once I found out about this program, I was so afraid that there wouldn't be enough foster families volunteering and that there would be no placement for my cats. Knowledge about this program to ensure there are enough volunteers is key. Also, I didn't know about this program until after I left. Women need to know this program exists while they are contemplating leaving.

### **Client H**

"There's so many abusers out there... these kinda programs need to be advertised more so ppl no there's help out here."

### **Our Recommendations**

1. The Federal Government should provide funding to established community-based non-profits and charities that have a proven track-record of providing safe, confidential, and sustainable pet-safekeeping services to survivors of family violence.
2. The Federal Government should provide funding to VAW shelters, homeless shelters, and transitional homes to become able to accommodate animals onsite.
3. The RCMP and all other police services in Canada—particularly those units dealing with family violence and human trafficking-- should have mandatory training on the "link" among four types of family violence: elder abuse, child abuse, animal abuse, and intimate partner violence.



Thank you for taking the time to consider our Brief, submitted with respect to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "H. Glaholt".

Hayley Rose Glaholt, Ph.D., M.Sc.  
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