

Task Force to Study the Statewide Response to Minors Exposed to Domestic Violence

MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, December 3, 2015

10:00 AM in Room 2A of the LOB

The meeting was called to order at 10:00 AM by Garry Lapidus,

The following committee members were present:

Donald Frechette; Rachel Pawloski; Jennifer Celentano; Rep. Diana Urban; Mary Painter; Damion Grasso; Laura DeLeo; Christine Rapillo; Joe DiTuono; Nikki Richter; Dr. Nina Livingston; Sarah Eagan; Cynthia Mahon; Karen O'Connor; Linda Harris; Garry Lapidus, and Karen Jarmoc

Karen Jarmoc welcomed everyone to the task force. Today the task force would be considering two recommendations. Rep. Diana Urban, chair of the Children's Committee, would be presenting on the intersection of animal cruelty and domestic violence. The task force would also be considering the draft recommendations and findings of the Office of Early childhood. At the next meeting, the task force would be going over the judicial findings and recommendations and the child welfare recommendations. At the final meeting in January, the task force will be considering public input. Ms. Jarmoc emphasized the value of public input as part of this process, and noted that there are two mechanisms for this, the first being to hold a public hearing at the last meeting, and the second being to post a draft of the recommendations on the task force website and invite the public to offer input. She also pointed out that if any of the recommendations become a component of legislative consideration, there will be a public hearing during the legislative committee process. She asked the task force for thoughts and recommendations on this aspect of the process.

Donald Frechette stated he would favor the second approach, as this would be better in terms of logistics.

Rep. Diana Urban began her presentation. She noted that when she was first elected, she championed the concept of the connection between animal abuse and violent behavior, and had a hard time getting the legislature to make this connection. The idea that animal cruelty had anything to do with violent behavior seemed to have no credibility, but significant research in this field has shown a link between animal cruelty and future violent behavior. Connecticut has made more progress than almost any other state in terms of tying animal cruelty to future violent behavior. When the Newtown tragedy happened and the legislature was looking for ways to diagnose and treat mental illness, it was found that animal cruelty has a clear link to violent behavior related to mental health issues. It is still difficult to get the courts to recognize this, and Rep. Urban is working on making a stronger link between animal cruelty and future violent behavior. Research shows that the way that animals are treated has a lot to do with family dynamics, and when there is animal neglect and abuse there is an 80% chance that a child in that household is also neglected or abused. 90% of the perpetrators in school shootings also abused animals, and animal cruelty is also prevalent among serial killers. This does turn into an intergenerational cycle of violence, where children exposed to domestic violence will often grow up and enter the cycle of violence because it is what they know. She suggested that when there is an issue of animal cruelty, ideally law enforcement would intervene before the cycle gets going and exacerbates the situation. Rep. Urban pointed out that often animals are used to control children.

In a case in Norwich, the father took the child's bunny and strangled the bunny in front of the children, and told the children that he would then strangle their dog and then their mother. The police had trouble with this because the bunny was considered a farm animal and not a domestic animal. Rep. Urban intervened in this case and showed that the bunny was, in fact, a pet and not a farm animal. She pointed out that these experiences can be traumatic for children, and it needs to be acknowledged that this is violence and an indicator of a violent person. She pointed out that the proper response to this is not jail time, but trauma-informed counseling and treatment. She included the power and control wheel in her presentation and discussed how animals are used to control family members. Rep. Urban used an example of video of a man strangling his partner's cat until she would say that she was not going to leave as an example of how animals are used to control people in these relationships. Sometimes, people don't leave these abusive relationships because they don't want to leave their pets behind, and Rep. Urban has worked with veterinarians to come up with solutions for this. Referring to the power and control wheel, she pointed out the usage of children in these situations where perpetrators will harm or kill a child's pet to intimidate them. She discussed an organization called Soul Friends, which uses animals to help children who have had traumatic incidences involving animal cruelty, and one of the children wrote a story about the traumatic experience of losing pets in a violent family situation. Rep. Urban spoke to the issue of children witnessing animal abuse and having trouble developing normal relationships after these events occur. She discussed several graphic incidences of animal cruelty and domestic violence, and pointed out that these weren't isolated incidents.

She discussed a recent public act passed in 2014 that requires cross-reporting of animal cruelty and child abuse. There are incidences where a DCF worker will be in a home or an animal control officer will be in a home, and based on the evidence that animal abuse and child abuse often coincide, stakeholders will cross-report so that DCF and animal control are working together to resolve these situations. Animal control officers and DCF workers alike have stated that this cross-reporting mechanism is immensely helpful in their work. These entities are also using the same form to report these abuses, which is immensely helpful.

Rep. Urban discussed one of the findings of an animal control officer sitting on another task force, that this has enhanced their work in animal cruelty, particularly with juvenile offenders. Animal control officers have discovered more cases of animal cruelty than before as a result of working with

DCF and in many of these incidences, juveniles are acting out because of what is happening in the home. She hopes that more work can be done in this area to reduce incidences of animal cruelty and domestic abuse.

Rep. Urban went over several slides defining child abuse and animal cruelty. She pointed out that up until recently, the state didn't require that animal control officers receive training until the state required training. The ACO and DCF workers have been incredibly receptive and happy about the cross-reporting legislation. She discussed the protocol as to how DCF and animal control officers respond to animal abuse. The Office of Legislative Research also produced a report on animal offenses. When Rep. Urban was first elected, they did not archive animal abuse cases, so there isn't data prior to 2002. Over a 10-year period, there were 3500 total offenses brought up under the animal cruelty statute, with only 18% of these cases resulting in a guilty verdict. She doesn't believe that this number is accurate and pointed out that 47% of these cases weren't prosecuted and 33% of these cases were dismissed and 2% of the cases were found not guilty. Rep. Urban has worked diligently to raise awareness of the linkage between child abuse and animal cruelty and ensuring that the courts are prosecuting to the fullest extent when there is animal cruelty. This isn't necessarily the type of offense that is helped by jail time, and counseling has been found to be more effective at combating animal abuse but she's having trouble getting judges to use counseling. Additionally, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has begun tracking animal abuse because they've recognized its importance in identifying future perpetrators of violent behavior. Rep. Urban is currently pursuing a bill for an animal advocate in court to try to highlight what has happened when an animal is exposed to or has suffered egregious cruelty. This animal advocate in court was be a law student in DC where they had a program that put law students in the courtroom, and she suggested using a similar program that would bring Connecticut law students into the courtroom to advocate for animals. Several law schools and private attorneys in the state would support a supervised law student in court to be animal advocates. The idea of this is to have a voice for the animal so that this is highlighted in the eyes of the judge that this is a precursor to future violent behavior. She asked if there were any questions.

Laura DeLeo talked about the issues she faced as a prosecutor in animal cruelty cases. She has seen the effects of abuse and neglect and asked if there was any data on which circumstances are a greater guarantee of violence perpetrated in the home.

Rep. Urban responded that in the most egregious cases, there is a stronger link to violence in the home and this link is really scary. In neglect cases, there is also neglect of the child and DCF is working on developing better policies around investigating neglect and abuse cases and responding to these better.

Donald Frechette asked about the link between reports of animal cruelty and DCF investigations. He asked what happens when DCF doesn't have an open case but there is a report of animal cruelty.

Rep. Urban responded that if the case meets legal sufficiency, then things can proceed but this is an area that they've been working on. If there isn't an open case and legal sufficiency, these cases aren't pursued and there is a need for more work in this area.

Garry Lapidus asked about the state's unique cross-reporting feature and the fact that the agencies are all using the same form. He asked how many times this form had been used.

Rep. Urban responded that yes, they do have data on this. When the legislation was initially passed, the bar was really high for a case to be reported and last session she made a minor change to allow for greater usage of this form. She has received a lot of positive feedback from DCF as well as the Department of Agriculture that this is working well.

Dr. Livingston commented that she frequently sees this as an overlap with child abuse evaluations. When children are brought in for diagnostics on abuse, they are often worried about other children or pets in the home. In her presentation to the task force, she talked about a case and the child had talked about a dog in the home who had been starved and chained to the stove for long periods and she wanted to know if someone could help the dog. When children are in treatment, they are often worried about their pets and the physicians will try to then direct the investigators to focus on this as part of the treatment of the child and the potential rescue of the pet, but this isn't always the focus of the investigators on the case, so this is a bit of a challenge but often recovery of the pet is an important step in helping the child recover from this traumatic situation.

Rep. Urban responded that she has been working to educate more so that police are aware of this issue. Research has shown that children's relationships with animals are very important in these situations.

Dr. Livingston stated that when they are interviewing children about who lives in the house with them, the pets are always considered family members to these children.

Rep. Urban agreed with this and spoke to the importance of educating people on this issue.

Linda Harris asked if the mandated reporter training that DCF provides includes information about the connection between animal cruelty and other violent behaviors.

Rep. Urban responded that yes, this is included in the training.

Ms. Jarmoc asked whether the task force could review the bill that Rep. Urban was proposing to include as part of their recommendations. She asked if there was language for this yet and Rep. Urban responded that this language had just been drafted. Ms. Jarmoc also asked what kind of data was being collected right now.

Rep. Urban responded that this is functional cross-reporting, so any time a DCF worker sees abuse, they file a report with DCF which is shared with animal control and any time an animal control officer sees child abuse, they file a report that is shared with DCF so the reports are cross-reporting. Currently, the departments are grappling with the notion of legal sufficiency to go in regardless, which hasn't been clearly defined.

Ms. Jarmoc suggested including this with the next agenda. She then asked if there were other opportunities to make things better. She asked Chief O'Connor about the DPS 230 form and whether this could include something about animals.

Chief O'Connor responded that officers are trained on animal cruelty as a possible precursor to other violence in the home—not just with family violence but with other forms of violence. Officers are trained to consider this, so it may be wise to include this on the DPS 230 form.

Ms. Jarmoc noted that this would dictate that in incidences where there was family violence in the home, it would also be reported that there was an animal in the home.

Rep. Urban responded that this would be meaningful, but that it is important to be careful to get the right data. When DCF does intake for domestic violence, they do ask about animals in the home and it would be beneficial to get a better picture of this.

Ms. Jarmoc asked Drs. Livingston and Grasso if they thought this would give a better understanding of children and trauma.

Dr. Livingston responded that they are already asking children what kinds of worries they have about their own bodies or what else they're worried about and what they would like to see happen next. The challenge is that for the professionals involved to make these things priorities in this case, because they have their own agendas related to the health of the child, and it may complicate things to have too much cross-referencing of roles in these settings as this may produce less accurate data on the case as a whole. She suggested training practitioners to integrate this into the service plan rather than having it be at the end of a long form where it might be disregarded. It's common for doctors to put in recommendations such as "know that the dog is okay" but this isn't necessarily a designated or required part of the service plan.

Dr. Grasso agreed with what Dr. Livingston said, and suggested that clinical therapists could address some of these themes but having this information available could be helpful.

Ms. Jarmoc asked if there could be a recommendation around healthcare developed regarding the issue of animal cruelty. She asked Joe if this was part of the process at CSSD

Joe responded that this was part of their risk assessment tool and family relations counselors are supposed to think about risk assessment and pet abuse is part of the risk assessment tools utilized. This has been used for a while, and is part of the protocol. When they conduct interviews with defendants, they ask these questions relative to all sorts of violence.

Someone asked about next steps and the other bill about animal assisted support for children exposed to trauma and DCF is supposed to provide this training. They are going to work with the injury prevention center to provide this training about the intersection between animal cruelty, child abuse and domestic violence, which should increase awareness. The department is also working on developing a smaller, more sustainable training that people can work with in an ongoing fashion. With IPV FAIR, they use the VIGOR safety tool which asks families about pets as part of planning for safety. In terms of collecting data, they are collecting data on cross-reporting and are ironing out some of the glitches, so there is some improvement here. In terms of the legal mandate of accepting a call with the department, this also goes back to the legal definition of neglect, and this would determine whether the Careline call would get accepted. If they have an open case and hear of animal cruelty, this gets communicated to the worker involved in the case.

Sarah Eagan asked about the protocol when DCF is investigating an accepted call, if the presence of an animal in the home is part of the investigation protocol. She also asked about what happens when a call comes in to report animal abuse and there isn't an open case, but there is a child in the home. She pointed out that an argument could be made that this is emotional abuse or neglect of a child. The notion that if an animal is being abused in the home, this could be considered emotional abuse or neglect and may be worth reporting.

Mary Painter stated she had the same question about the reporting of animal cruelty in their intake protocol. DCF is upgrading its data collection system, and this would be the time to ensure that this data is being collected and reported. She knows that some caseworkers do this, but she doesn't know if this is being practiced across the board. She agreed that this should be part of the decision-making and training that the caseworkers have to understand what follow-up questions they need to ask when determining the course of treatment for the child.

Ms. Eagan pointed out that one of the potential benefits could be that this would be a way of finding out on a systematic basis whether this is a concern of the child.

Donald Frechette stipulated a concern that the problem is known, but if there is no open DCF case, then the department will have to wait until something happens before it is able to act. He asked Trooper O'Connor if, in cases involving egregious animal cruelty, if they start to investigate whether there is potential child abuse or domestic abuse.

Trooper O'Connor responded that law enforcement frequently makes hairline calls when they're not necessary and frequently over-responds to situations that don't warrant this kind of response. In cases where they observe severe animal abuse where there is a child in the home, they do make a DCF referral. Officers aren't trained to ascertain what's happening when they're not there, so they make a DCF referral in these cases. When responding to abuse, a DCF call would be made if there's a child in the home. In the domestic violence training, they make it clear that abuse to pets is a sign of other issues going on, so this opens the door to this sort of questioning and officers are trained to gain an understanding of what else is going on in the home. It can be difficult to gather data because officers don't spend a lot of time in the home, and having a box on the form to ask whether there is an animal in the home may make the officers more likely to pay attention to these details so that they can have better data.

Ms. Eagan noted that there is another opportunity for data collection from attorneys who represent the children in court. This could be another source of data on these cases, and possibly another reporting avenue for incidences of animal cruelty.

A voice agreed that this is a great idea and this is another place where more investigation can be done.

Ms. Mahon discussed her experience in the juvenile court where the attorney for a minor child will ask a child who they want to visit with and the child will often respond that they want to visit with their pet as opposed to another family member.

Ms. Jarmoc suggested that this could be explored as a recommendation around training or cross-training. She then asked Ms. Eagan about the types of questions asked when doing child fatality reviews and suggested that this was another area to explore.

Ms. Eagan responded that this was another area to explore in her field.

Mr. Lapidus asked about the veterinarians' role in this and how much education and training they got in this area.

Rep. Urban responded that in other states, veterinarians are sometimes mandated reporters, but it has been found that people are less likely to take their animals in for treatment when they know that the veterinarian is a mandated reporter. Veterinarians are very well-versed in this and have been helping with the legislation and have been participating in the discussions around the kinds of suffering the animals are going through, but this has been a difficult area because people are less likely to bring their animals to the veterinarian if the vet is a mandated reporter. The public act that allowed for cross-reporting of these abuses was able to reach beyond the issue of mandated reporting and get closer to the source of these abuses.

Ms. Mahon asked if there was discussion of making animal control officers mandated reporters.

Rep. Urban responded that the state is requiring more training of animal control officers as previously there was no training required, so this has been a process.

Ms. Jarmoc noted that in Connecticut there is a formal memorandum between the Connecticut Veterinary Association and the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence so if there is a victim who wants to access shelter, the CVA will take their pet(s) for the duration so that the victim doesn't feel that they can't leave the house because the animal is still in the home.

Rep. Urban thanked Ms. Jarmoc for her efforts on this.

Ms. Jarmoc began to discuss the task force's recommendations on early childhood. The draft Ms. Jarmoc prepared summarized Linda Harris's presentation on early childhood. She invited Ms. Harris to comment on the recommendations.

Ms. Harris responded that the Office of Early Childhood wants to help families create environments that are healthy for children. She noted that the Office has many different programs designed to help families, and included in her recommendations that they do some additional training.

Ms. Jarmoc asked whether the recommendations captured the agency's wish to improve training practices.

Ms. Harris responded that she liked the initial recommendations but would like more time to consider them and make possible changes. She noted that the Office of Early Childhood was designed by the governor to have all services that impact families under one roof, and there are a lot of initiatives going on in the Office of Early Childhood where they are bringing people from across disciplines together to look at how we can strengthen families and support children. She noted that in the training recommendations where it says to provide for accountability to the offender, that their goal is to support the victim and their children and they will support and follow recommendations from a court and make DCF referrals when necessary. The Office of Early Childhood is intended to connect and support families affected by domestic violence, and stated that the police and courts have the responsibility of holding perpetrators accountable. The Office does not want to support the idea that an offender have access to the family until the courts determine the situation to be safe. She is interested in securing the domestic violence assessment tool, and thinks it is a good idea to come up with some common tools that all stakeholders are using. In the home visiting program, they are looking for a domestic violence assessment tool. She noted that her Office also needs to include more information around animal abuse when it works for families. When she worked with DCF, they didn't really pay attention to animal abuse and one of the most egregious cases she investigated was one where an animal was being abused. She noted that there needs to be better training for social workers in identifying the risk factors for abuse domestic violence. She also suggested that stakeholders take advantage of the trainings offered by the National Council on Juvenile and Family Court Judges to bring in people from different perspectives to add to the body of knowledge on these cases. She also suggested that the community needed to be better trained on providing trauma-informed approaches and she supports most of the recommendations, but she would like to consult with her office and bring back additional recommendations.

Ms. Jarmoc responded that at the next meeting on the 17th, the group would be getting a draft of the report. She asked Ms. Harris if she could offer her feedback so that it could be incorporated and discussed at the upcoming meeting in January.

Dr. Livingston added that home visiting is critical for families in the state as a means of primary prevention. She suggested in regard to screening and assessment tools, to make sure that workers are linking this with some sort of referral guidance because sometimes people are screening but don't know how to respond. She suggested including this as referrals to advocacy; mental health for kids; and that there be a joint development of a screening or assessment tool with a referral guide that the workers can use to make it an appropriate response.

Ms. Harris agreed and stated her desire to use evidence-based tools. Right now, there are protocols in place as to what workers should do as far as reaching out to communities and making warm connections when there's a need to make these referrals. when there's a need to make these referrals. If multiple agencies are using the VIGOR tool, for example, then maybe this should be used more broadly because everyone should be using baseline tools that are similar so when these entities discuss these cases, they're using the same terms and language.

Ms. Eagan commented on the additional recommendations for early childhood. She agreed that this was a critical part of prevention and intervention. She advocated that it would be important to think about the recommendations by using the data that the state has to help inform a need and understanding of capacity along the continuum that home visiting services. There is currently need that exceeds the capacity of the current intervention and prevention programs, and we should be working to build the capacity within this continuum. The group had discussed prevention and information sharing, but families that have been exposed to domestic violence need a different service. Her impression is that the need exceeds the ability to provide services to children who have experienced trauma in their families. This is a critical outstanding need and the system doesn't yet have full capacity to respond to all of these cases. There is familiarity with what the needs of these children are, but there isn't the capacity to serve these children. Ms. Eagan suggested that the task force recommend capacity building within this continuum that would differentiate between prevention and intervention services.

Ms. Painter added that DCF needs to continue to work on its data collection to figure out what the true need is and areas where they can build capacity. There are different areas working on this, and the Connecticut data portal is a requirement for all state agencies to start entering data into this portal, which may be a place where all of the data can go. DCF is going to start inputting the trends related to domestic violence and substance use. They need to figure out the true relationship between capacity and need so that they can be strategic, as they currently have very limited funding to go about this.

Ms. Eagan added that there are some areas where there are known waiting lists, and perhaps the task force can articulate that the waiting list is eliminated for families with children who have experienced trauma and family violence.

Ms. Harris agreed that this was important, and noted that her office is trying to prevent the children from being impacted by domestic violence. Sometimes it is more challenging to determine the actual need, but they do know how many children are born with certain risk factors, so they can provide a guesstimate as to how many children, if the Office works with their families early on, might be prevented from having these traumatic experiences. Her Office can provide more information on this regarding how many children are being born into an environment with the highest risk factors for family violence.

Ms. Jarmoc asked Ms. Harris to submit something in writing that could be incorporated into one of the subject areas. She noted that she and Garry met with Futures Without Violence, which produced a policy document that aligns well with the work of the task force. She also noted that this group

identified the most important area for intervention was to help parents with young children. She asked if there were any comments on the Safe Dates component of the recommendations.

Mr. Lapidus noted that this was very important to the work of the task force. They had discussed primary preventative care and strengthening this work in the schools, and the recommendations in the document are imperative to moving things in the right direction over time.

Ms. Eagan stated that it was very helpful to link the DPS behavior survey data with the recommendations. It is important to consider everything that youth report, from dating violence to bullying, youth despair, etc., and DPS is very good at obtaining this data and getting participation from school districts in the state. She commended the recommendations on including this data as it is important to use this in a comprehensive way.

Ms. Jarmoc asked Christine Rapillo to submit some recommendations. She also asked Trooper O'Connor if she had enough time to compile and submit her recommendations regarding law enforcement.

Trooper O'Connor noted that one of the recommendations was with regard to an officer following up with a child at school, which is a good idea, but statute requires victims of domestic violence remain confidential.

Ms. Jarmoc suggested that the task force investigate this further to see if this was feasible.

Christine Rapillo noted that the task force talked a lot about information sharing between different agencies, which impacts people when they are involved in state services. In the area of work on delinquency cases, there is an information sharing guidebook which has been very helpful. She suggested convening another working group to look at this guidebook and come up with ways to do better information sharing and see if something can be added to it with regard to people who regularly touch the court system who are involved with domestic violence or if there are pieces of this that need to be highlighted for the stakeholders involved in these cases. Her sense is that there aren't as many legal bars to the information sharing as people perceive. This group could also recommend any necessary statutory changes to permit better information sharing among agencies.

Ms. Painter stated that this aligned with one of the recommendations that DCF was going to submit.

Ms. Rapillo stated she would send her recommendation to Ms. Jarmoc and include a recommendation on attorney training because attorneys are involved with these families in many aspects.

A motion was duly made and seconded to adjourn the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:19 AM.

Sara LeMaster
Task Force Staff