

REMARKS

OF

MARY LOU LEARY
ACTING ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
ANIMAL CRUELTY LISTENING SESSION

ON

TUESDAY, APRIL 30, 2013
WASHINGTON, DC

Good afternoon. I'm Mary Lou Leary, Acting Assistant Attorney General here at the Office of Justice Programs. I want to thank you all for being here and for your interest in the issue of animal cruelty and its intersection with other forms of violent behavior in our society.

I want to recognize and thank my senior advisor, Katherine Darke-Schmitt, for her leadership on the DOJ Animal Cruelty Working Group. I know this is an issue she feels passionately about, and she's done a terrific job coordinating the group's efforts. Also, a little later, the Acting Associate Attorney General, Tony West, will join us. We'll look forward to hearing from him.

This event is an outgrowth of work the Office of Justice Programs started on a small scale a couple of years ago, and I'm so pleased that it's grown to include our colleagues from across the Department. We have an impressive collection of expertise in the room. We have national animal advocacy organizations represented; prosecutors; judges; victim advocates (both human and animal!); researchers; social workers; representatives from the elder abuse, domestic violence, and child maltreatment service communities; law enforcement at the federal and local levels; and a room full of interested DOJ observers, to boot. We've never held a session like this – to discuss animal cruelty and its intersection with public safety.

The topic of animal cruelty may seem unimportant in the face of events like the Boston bombing, school shootings, and other recent tragedies, but we know there's a history of animal cruelty in the backgrounds of many perpetrators of violent acts. Understanding this link between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence is critical to the Department. Research demonstrates that the incidence of animal abuse is disproportionately higher in homes where family violence is present compared with homes where it's not. For example, children in domestic violence shelters are 20 percent more likely to have witnessed animal abuse than children outside the shelter system.

Women seeking shelter from battering spouses have reported their spouses using cruelty or threats of cruelty against household pets as part of the controlling tactics to prevent them from seeking safety. In one shelter study, up to 40 percent of women reported that they were unable to leave the homes where they were victimized because they were concerned about leaving their animals behind. Clinical data also suggest there may be an association between elder abuse and animal cruelty.

Retrospective studies of prison populations show that violent adult offenders are significantly more likely than non-offenders to report that they committed animal cruelty in childhood or adolescence. And we've documented the links between animal cruelty such as dog and cock fighting and organized crime and other threats to public safety.

The research is very revealing, and it suggests a strong link between animal cruelty and public safety. I think we have a lot to learn from each other today in exploring this link. And now is a perfect time to be having this conversation, seeing that April is Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Month. I'm looking forward to our discussion.

###