

MIAMI INCLUSION ALLIANCE By: Sharon Langer Esq.

In my October article I wrote about how most domestic violence shelters do not provide adequate space for pets when a victim is fleeing their home and seeking safety. Many times victims worry about what will happen to their pet and that fear and worry keeps them in dangerous situations. Multiple studies have shown that domestic abusers often seek to manipulate or intimidate their victims by threatening or harming their pets, but according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), only three percent of domestic violence shelters across the country accept pets. The ASPCA reported that a study in Wisconsin found 68 percent of domestic violence survivors reported their abusers were also violent towards their animals. A similar study found that as many as 25 percent of domestic violence survivors have returned to an abusive partner out of concern for their pet. A separate 2007 study found that as many as one-third of domestic abuse survivors reported they delayed leaving an abuser for an average of two years out of concern for the safety of their pet.

A new bill has been passed in Congress called the Peters Bill to Protect Survivors of domestic Violence & Pets, and hopefully this bill will begin to address this serious issue. The *Pet and Women Safety (PAWS)* Act helps provide funding for facilities that harbor survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking and dating violence and their pets, or are looking to do so. The legislation passed the Senate and the House of Representatives as part of a larger bill setting agriculture policy and has been signed into law. "Survivors of domestic violence should never have to decide between leaving an abusive relationship or staying and risking their safety to protect their pets," **said Senator Peters**. "This bill will help ensure more safe havens for survivors and their pets are available - so together they can begin a new chapter in their lives. The bill recognizes that "Pets are a significant source of support, and oftentimes, a family member. No one should ever be forced to choose between their own safety and the safety of their pets," **said Holly Gann, Director of Federal Affairs, and Animal Wellness Action**. "The inclusion of the PAWS Act in the Farm Bill will help victims of domestic violence and their pets escape abusive environments and seek the shelter and safety they need. The PAWS Act expands existing federal domestic violence protections to include threats or acts of violence against a survivor's pet, and provides grant funding to programs that offer shelter and housing assistance for domestic violence survivors with pets. The bill also requires the full amount of the survivor's losses for purposes of restitution in domestic violence and stalking offenses to include any costs incurred for veterinary services relating to physical care for the survivor's pet.

I believe this is GIANT step forward in our recognition of the importance of the human- animal bond. I will keep you posted on its implementation on our community. If you have any questions or want to discuss further, contact me at Sharon@justdigit.org.