

**Sunday Column – Animal Cruelty Matters**  
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Those of us who count companion animals as family members do so because we experience them as intelligent and sentient beings. They ask very little of us yet they give us unconditional, never ending love. We know we can count on them always.

Those of us who work on behalf of companion animals hear terrible stories about how pets are abused by those they love and trust. It is hard to fathom why anyone would intentionally hurt an animal, especially their own. Unfortunately, we have to contend with the fact that it happens.

Animal abuse is serious business. Dog fighting is linked to illegal drugs, gambling and guns. Animal hoarding is a form of mental illness. Physical abuse and neglect of animals can be an outward sign that elder, spousal and child abuse is occurring behind closed doors.

When local government and law enforcement takes these cases seriously they may very well be saving a whole family from a terrible existence. They may help to stop an endless cycle of abuse which will later be practiced by the children who grow up in these homes. They most certainly protect the public from the various threats that emanate from these unholy acts.

Since I began working in this field I have found that local government does not necessarily have the resources to intervene. It begins with neighbors who are reticent to sign their names to a complaint for fear of retribution. Law enforcement can't do anything if they are not made aware of abuse or given sufficient cause to enter a property.

I've learned that animal control and law enforcement agency personnel may not have accurate information regarding the law. They are not lawyers and, from what I understand, in many jurisdictions they may learn on the job and what they learn from their peers can be sketchy.

Where animal control and law enforcement personnel are made aware of an issue, and where they do receive appropriate training in animal law, they may lack the funds, manpower and kennel space to go into a situation where they have to seize a large number of animals. It can take months and even years to bust a large dog fighting operation. If law enforcement has not lined up the support of the ASPCA or the Humane Society of the United States they may not be in a position to take action at all.

I'm sure we're all agreed that it shouldn't be this way, but in fact it is. We can't expect local governments to do this all alone. We have to become part of the solution if we want to protect animals, children and the elderly. And local government will have to take us seriously.

When residents in Lee County, Alabama discovered several dead dogs, pigs and chickens earlier this week, the Lee County Sheriff's Office got right on it. Though he acknowledges there could

be any number of possible explanations, Sheriff Jones let us know his office takes these cases seriously and made a commitment to get to the bottom of it.

Possibly the most important element in all of this is that law enforcement understands the ramifications of animal abuse and is motivated to follow through when an incident is reported. We are fortunate that in Lee County this is the case.

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