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## Experiences of Social Workers Assisting Victims of Domestic Violence Who Own Pets

Kimberly Elizabeth Bolesta  
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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Kimberly Elizabeth Bolesta

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2025

Abstract

Experiences of Social Workers Assisting Victims of Domestic Violence Who Own Pets

by

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MS, Grand Canyon University, 2022

BS, University of Scranton, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

May 2025

## Abstract

Victims of domestic violence often face significant barriers when attempting to leave abusive relationships, one of which is the presence of pets. Victims form strong bonds with their pets, and if left behind with abusers, pets may be harmed or killed. When victims flee relationships, they may go to shelters. Domestic violence shelters are often unable to accommodate victims who bring pets. Victims may experience trauma and stress when turned away from shelters. Social workers may be unable to assist victims and their pets due to lack of resources. This study involved using Hobfoll's theory of conservation of resources as the theoretical framework. The theory is that physical and symbolic resources can increase or reduce stress and trauma as a result of adversity. This qualitative study involved understanding lived experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own pets and identifying barriers experienced by this population. This study involved using a phenomenological approach to address research questions and lived experiences of interviewees. Seven participants who work or have worked as social workers at domestic violence shelters were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol that was developed for this study. An analysis of responses revealed 6 themes: social worker identity, stress and trauma, vulnerability, resiliency, resources, and barriers. Findings from this study could contribute to positive social change by improving the ability of victims to leave abusive relationships safely with their pets and also providing social workers better resources to support both victims and their pets.

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## Dedication

To Miss Hailey Camp, may your future be bright as the stars at night.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Social workers are focused on their clients' wellbeing and work to resolve social problems involving unemployment, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, and medical issues. They work in hospitals, schools, mental health facilities, domestic violence shelters, and communities. While some social workers like pets or generally like animals, they do not often consider pets when creating treatment plans. Their focus is solely on their clients' wellbeing. Social work and animal welfare share a common history.

In 1874, a young girl named Mary Ellen Wilson was severely beaten and neglected by her foster mother. She was forced into hard labor and often insufficiently dressed in the winter in New York City (Jalongo, 2006). She was in constant misery due to the maltreatment she received from her foster mother. Etta Wheeler, a social worker who discovered the child's dire condition and worked to improve her conditions, was unsuccessful in removing her from the home.

Etta Wheeler was determined to help Mary Ellen Wilson, but due to lax child abuse laws, little could be done unless someone could witness abuse of Mary Ellen (Jalongo, 2006). She turned to Henry Bergh, who established the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in 1866 for assistance in Mary Ellen's case. Bergh contacted an attorney, Elbridge T. Gerry, who would later become an attorney for the ASPCA. Wheeler, Bergh, and Gerry brought Mary Ellen Wilson's case to the New York Supreme Court and built this case using already established animal cruelty laws. The Court ruled in favor of Mary Ellen Wilson and convicted her caregiver of child

abuse. This was the first landmark child abuse conviction case, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was created from this case.

If the ASPCA and social workers had not created an alliance, child abuse laws might continue to be nonexistent, and many children would still suffer abuse and neglect. Since Mary Ellen Wilson's case, child maltreatment laws have been enacted, and family courts work with families to ensure children are protected from abuse and neglect and decisions are made in their best interest.

A recent trend involves social workers recognizing human/animal bonds, which is significant in relationships which involve domestic violence. People suffer from violence in their homes and remain in unsafe living situations due to lack of resources because they own pets. Victims of domestic violence often delay leaving relationships because they fear for their pets' safety (Campbell, 2021; Cleary et al., 2021; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Kotzmann et al., 2022; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Vrečko, 2019). Victims who remain with their abusers risk more severe abuse the longer they stay in relationships, which can lead to lethal violence.

Social workers lack resources when victims seek assistance from shelters with their pets, and in some cases, victims are turned away and face homelessness due to pets. Social workers also experience frustration and trauma when victim decide to return to their abusers because their pets were threatened or harmed (Arkow, 2020). This is because of social workers' lack of training regarding human/animal bonds. Pets are parts of families and can be victims of domestic violence (Kotzmann et al., 2022). They can experience pain and psychological trauma just like human victims.

## **Background**

Domestic or intimate partner violence is a serious public health problem (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). While domestic violence can affect both men and women, women are usually victims. Domestic violence involves many forms of abusive behaviors, including sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological abuse (Spencer et al., 2022). When victims try to leave their abusive relationships, they might struggle due to lack of resources or family support. While victims might be away from abusers, it does not mean abuse will stop. Victims might be subjected to other forms of abuse, such as psychological aggression or stalking (Ørke et al., 2022). When this happens, victims might feel threatened or forced to return to abusive relationships. In relationships where there is animal abuse, there is an increased chance that victims experience severe forms violence such as rape or strangulation, which could be lethal (Barret et al., 2022).

Victims experience many barriers that prevent them from accessing resources to help them leave relationships, such as lack of money, support, and safe housing. Abusers attempts to isolate victims away from family and friends (Fitzgerald et al., 2019).

According to the American Pet Products Association (APPA) (2021), 66% of American households own pets. Owning pets has become a growing trend, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people who experienced loneliness during pandemic adopted or took in new pets. They were positive sources of companionship for those experiencing loneliness during the pandemic (Martos Martinez-Caja et al., 2022). Pets also assist with health and mental wellbeing, giving people positive outlooks on life.

In abusive relationships, pets also are a positive source of comfort for victims. However, they are also used as ways to control and coerce victims into submission (Campbell, 2021). Perpetrators can threaten to abuse or kill pets, and if victims try to leave relationships, it can increase chances pets are harmed. Due to this, victims delay leaving relationships because of their pets (Campbell, 2021; Cleary et al., 2021; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Kotzmann et al., 2022; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Vrečko, 2019). When victims delay leaving relationships, it increases their risks of severe abuse, leading to homicide (Barrett et al., 2020; Gutowski & Goodman, 2023; Stevenson et al., 2018). The longer victims stay in relationships, the more dangerous they becomes for victims and pets.

There is a lack of resources including shelters, family members, and fosters to assist with care and safety of beloved pets. When victims stay in relationships, abuse will likely intensify, increasing risks of death (Barrett et al., 2020; Gutowski & Goodman, 2023; Stevenson et al., 2018). If victims try to leave abusive relationships, they are forced to leave pets behind or take them, risking homelessness. Many domestic violence shelters are unable to accommodate victims with their pets, and victims must decide to return to their homes or remain homeless if they cannot stay with family or friends.

Domestic violence in homes can range from mild to severe. When victims decide to leave relationships, often they flee with minimal belongings. Abusers isolate victims from friends and family, and when victims leave, they flee to domestic violence shelters. Shelters accommodate victims and children. However, victims are turned away if they bring their pets (Giesbrecht, 2022b). Shelters have turned to using pet-friendly hotels to

assist victims with pets; however, with the growing trend of pet ownership, there are not enough resources to help all victims who own pets.

Victims in abusive relationships experience pain, suffering, and trauma. It becomes even more traumatic when they are forced to leave behind beloved pets with abusers or told at shelters that they cannot accommodate their pets. Social workers also experience trauma when they cannot assist victims who own pets due to lack of resources and training (Hobfoll, 1989). Lack of training and resources negatively impact victims and social workers. Social workers also struggle with feelings of frustration because victims decide to return to abusive relationships out of fear and wanting to keep their pets safe.

### **Problem Statement**

Many households in America experience some form of domestic violence. Domestic violence can range from mild to severe and affects both men and women. However, women are usually the primary victims of domestic violence. According to the World Health Organization (n.d.), one in three women experience domestic violence in their lifetimes. Victims who experience domestic violence can find support from hotlines and domestic violence shelters when they wish to leave relationships.

However, newer trends involving owning pets may become a barrier for victims who seek to leave abusive relationships. Pet ownership has increased, and presumably this includes people in abusive relationships. Humans are not the only victims of domestic violence. Pets experience abuse and neglect when there is domestic violence in homes, and some abusers threaten or harm pets to maintain power and control over

victims (Alleyne & Parfitt, 2019; Barrett et al., 2020; Barrett et al., 2022; Campbell, 2020; Campbell, 2021; Cleary et al., 2021; Dale & Yeung, 2021; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Giesbrecht, 2022; Hawkins et al., 2019; Kotzmann et al., 2022; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Vrečko, 2019). If victims do not have to worry about their pets, they are more likely to leave abusive relationships and never return.

Victims form strong bonds with their pets and can become the only positive sources of comfort victims have within relationships. They become concerned for their wellbeing and safety. Because of this, victims often delay leaving relationships because they fear for their pets' safety. When victims decide to leave pets behind with abusers, it allows abusers to use pets to exert power and control. Abusers will threaten to harm or kill pets if victims do not return. Also, Stevenson et al. (2018) found even though victims leave relationships without their pets, they sometimes leave shelters and return home to check on their pets' wellbeing.

Policy has not kept up with current trends involving pet ownership. Pets are often overlooked as part of family units and traditionally considered property. Lawmakers have initiated protective orders that include pets, but if abusers own pets, it becomes difficult for victims to leave abusive relationships. Policymakers identify pets as victims of abuse within abusive relationships and provide resources for their protection, even if abuser own pets (November, 2023).

When victims flee abusive relationships and seek help from shelters, they are faced with few options, as shelters are sometimes unable to accommodate pets. Victims have to become homeless, return to abusers, or leave their pets behind with abusers.

Victims who return to their abusers often experience severe abuse, and their chances of being murdered by their abusers increase (Barrett et al., 2020; Gutowski & Goodman, 2023; McFarlane et al., 2015, Messing et al., 2021; Stevenson et al., 2018).

While some domestic violence shelters have implemented pet-friendly hotels to help accommodate pets because of newer pet ownership trends, they are struggling with resources to accommodate victims and their needs. Social workers struggle to assist victims with their pets. They are not given training at their place of employment or educational institutions to recognize human/pet bonds (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019; Tarshis & Baird, 2019). They often neglect to ask about pets or incorporate pets into treatment plans (Arkow, 2020; Barrett et al., 2022; Randour et al., 2021). When pets are overlooked and not accounted for, it increases chances victims make decisions regarding their pets (Stevenson et al., 2018). Victims will return home to check on pets' wellbeing despite clinical recommendations to not return. This leads to frustration, fear, and worry for social workers because victims place themselves in more danger. Social workers experience trauma when they cannot assist victims who own pets (Tarshis & Baird, 2019).

Although many studies have explored links between animal abuse and domestic violence and the existence of human/pet bonds, there is insufficient information regarding experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence and own pets. This study will fill the gap in literature by identifying barriers social workers encounter when working with victims of domestic violence who own pets.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study involved exploring, describing, and understanding lived experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own pets. I addressed a literature gap to help understand barriers and trauma they experience.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, I used the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the lived experience of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own a pet?

RQ2: What barriers do social workers experience when assisting victims of domestic violence who own a pet?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was Hobfoll's theory of conservation of resources. This theory involves how people use physical or symbolic resources to cope with stressors or traumatic events. Resources are anything that has value to people.

Throughout life, people gain and develop as well as lose resources when they are no longer needed. When people lack resources, they use unhealthy coping strategies to manage their stressors. These unhealthy coping strategies can be traumatic and self-defeating, which could lead to more loss of resources. Lack of resources can make people feel desperate and vulnerable. This could lead them to make decisions that are not in their best interest (Hobfoll, 1989).

Victims of domestic violence who own pets view their pets as resources for coping with abuse. When victims leave relationships, they are faced with the choice of having to leave pets behind because shelters cannot accommodate pets or become homeless. Decisions that victims have to make may be traumatic when having to leave behind beloved pets with abusers. It becomes more traumatic when pets are threatened or harmed in order to force victims to return to relationships. Even if pets remain safe, the option to surrender to local animal shelter could be traumatizing because of strong human/animal bonds. Social workers may also experience trauma when assisting victims who own pets. They do not have enough resources to accommodate victims with pets, often turning them away from shelters. This could be traumatizing for social workers who want to help victims escape their abusive relationships. Also, social workers do not receive necessary training in school or work to understand how to respond to and assist victims who own pets. Many social workers experience problems working with clients who own pets because they do not know how to incorporate pets into treatment plans or decision-making (Randour et al., 2021; Yeung et al., 2020). This leads to frustration and lack of treatment when clients make decisions based on their pets' wellbeing. Homeless people might refuse housing if their pets cannot live with them. This leads to wasted time and resources when social workers are unaware of or not trained to include pets in treatment planning. In domestic violence situations, social workers may not be aware of existing resources, such as pet-friendly hotels or safety planning, in order to assist victims. Social workers can experience trauma when victims decide to return to their abusers because of their pets (Tarshis & Baird, 2019).

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this qualitative study is phenomenological. I sought to explore lived experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own pets. The primary source of data was responses from semi-structured interviews with six to 10 participants who were social workers working at domestic violence shelters. A digital recorder was used to record interviews. Other sources of data included field notes and journals. Open coding was used to analyze data. Coding was done by hand, and ATLAS.ti was used to help code and analyze data. Epoche is the process of when researchers suspend their normal everyday judgments and the phenomenon is viewed in a new way (Patton, 2015). Bracketing was used to help prevent biased assumptions during interpretation and analysis. Peer support and member checking were also used to prevent bias.

### **Definitions**

*Animal Abuse:* Socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and or death of an animal (Ascione, 1993).

*Domestic Violence:* Any behavior that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm within relationships (World Health Organization, n.d.).

*Social Worker:* A person who is clinically trained and assists clients with environmental planning and works to improve self-esteem (Woodward, 1961).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed all participants were truthful about their experiences. I also assumed social workers who owned pets were biased toward victims who own pets versus those

who did not. These participants were more inclined to recognize human/animal bonds and had more resources to assist victims with pets.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Semi-structured interviews with social workers who responded to and assisted victims of domestic violence who own pets were primary sources of data. Interview questions involved lived experiences of this population. The phenomenological design was chosen because past qualitative and quantitative studies have not focused on this topic. This study will help fill a literature gap and advance the field. Participants were interviewed about their experiences using a phenomenological approach. Participants were people who worked at domestic violence shelters or had other roles such and were not social workers but had experiences with victims of domestic violence who owned pets.

### **Limitations**

Generalizability was difficult due to the small sample size, and the study was delimited to experiences of social workers who worked at domestic violence shelters. This does not represent all social workers working in fields where domestic violence and pets are present, such as homeless shelters. There was also potential researcher and participant bias during interviews, which affected trustworthiness and credibility of findings.

### **Significance**

This study will fill a gap in understanding experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own pets. Understanding barriers, stress, and trauma experienced by this population will help direct policymakers to allocate more resources to benefit social workers, victims, and pets. Funding for more pet-friendly hotels will assist victims when they cannot be accommodated at shelters due to pets. With more resources, social workers can educate their clients and help create safety plans to keep victims and pets safe when leaving relationships.

This study will also help educators understand the importance of human/animal bonds, which should be incorporated into teaching curriculum. Teachers can assist new social workers and help them recognize the importance of this bond within domestic violence relationships. Teaching students about human/animal bonds will help social workers incorporate pets into their treatment plans. They will also be knowledgeable about barriers their clients face when they own pets. They will be able to address these barriers confidently and without judgment.

Victims will have safer ways to exit abusive relationships with their pets without the stress of being turned away from shelters and experiencing homelessness or having to return to abusers. The option of leaving pets behind only gives abusers the ability to use pets to maintain power over victims and keep them in relationships. The longer victims stay in relationships, the likelier the abuse will become more severe, and the risk of death is greater.

## Summary

Victims of domestic violence face barriers leaving abusive relationships when they own pets. Pets often cause victims to delay leaving relationships because they fear for pets' safety. Domestic violence shelters are unable to accommodate victims with pets and turn them away. This forces victims to remain homeless or return to abusive relationships (Laing, 2021; November, 2023). Returning to relationships greatly increases risks of severe harm or death to victims. Leaving pets behind allows abusers to harm or kill pets as ways to control victims, forcing them back into relationships (Alleyne & Parfitt, 2019; Barrett et al., 2020; Barrett et al., 2022; Campbell, 2020; Campbell, 2021; Cleary et al., 2021; Dale & Yeung, 2021; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Giesbrecht, 2022; Hawkins et al., 2019; Kotzmann et al., 2022; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Vrečko, 2019). Social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence struggle with barriers. They are not given training to recognize human/animal bonds. Social workers experience trauma when victims decide to return to abusers or make other decisions involving their pets' needs. Understanding experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims who own pet will help lead to more resources for social workers to assist victims in terms of safely leaving relationships with their petS. Chapter 2 includes the literature review and search strategies regarding this topic. I address themes in literature and research gaps.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a link between animal abuse and domestic violence (Alleyne & Parfitt, 2019; Arkow, 2020; Barrett et al., 2020; Barrett et al., 2022; Campbell, 2020; Cleary et al., 2021; Dale & Yeung, 2021; Kotzmann et al., 2022). Victims form close bonds with their pets and fear for their safety, especially when domestic violence is present in relationships. Abusers often use pets as a form of power and control to keep victims in relationships. When victims decide to flee relationships with pets, they face barriers preventing them from successfully leaving. Perpetrators of abuse often isolate victims away from friends and family. Victims often have limited financial resources to move out on their own due to isolation (Campbell, 2020; Dutton & Goodman, 2005).

When victims try to flee relationships, they seek protection at domestic violence shelters when friends and family are unavailable. If they take their pets with them, they may be turned away from shelters because they cannot accommodate pets (Stevenson et al., 2018). This forces victims to decide either return to abusers, abandon pets, surrender pets to shelters, or remain homeless with pets. If victims choose to return to abusers, the risk of more severe abuse and death is increased (Barrett et al., 2020; Gutowski & Goodman, 2023; McFarlane et al., 2015; Messing et al., 2021; Stevenson et al., 2018).

Surrendering pets to shelters, abandoning them, or leaving them with abusers can be traumatic for victims because of close relational bonds with pets (Barrett et al., 2020; Barrett et al., 2022; Campbell, 2021; Cleary et al., 2021; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Giesbrecht, 2022; Hawkins et al., 2019; Kotzmann et al., 2022; Laing, 2021; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Randour et al., 2021; Yeung et al., 2020).

Pets also will suffer more abuse and death if left with abusers, which is also traumatizing to victims. Social workers who respond to and assist victims who own pets also experience trauma when they face barriers in terms of helping victims leave relationships safely (November, 2023). Social workers are not trained or taught to assist victims who own pets. School curricula do not acknowledge human/animal bonds, so newly-graduated social workers focus only on human clients. When social workers do not include or discuss pets with clients, it can cause frustration and trauma regarding decisions involving their pets' wellbeing, such as returning to abusers because social worker treatment plans cannot accommodate pets (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019; Tarshis & Baird, 2019).

Social workers are often not trained at their places of employment to address human/animal bonds in their treatment plans. Many social workers learn on their own as they are not provided any guidance or training (Laing, 2021; Yeung et al., 2020). This causes frustration and trauma to social workers when victims they are helping are unable to follow through with their treatment plans due to concern about wellbeing of pets. Social workers often lack resources and knowledge to assist victims and their pets, and those who do not own pets may struggle to understand human/animal bonds and trauma people experience when they cannot accommodate their pets. With growing numbers of pet owners, assisting clients who own pets is becoming more challenging (November, 2023).

Some domestic violence shelters can offer limited assistance to victims and their pets by using pet-friendly hotels. However, with the growing trend of pet ownership, the

demand for more services is becoming more difficult to keep up with in terms of victims needing assistance. I aimed to understand experiences of social workers who responded to and assisted victims who owned pets. Understanding their experiences will help policymakers and educational facilities provide much-needed resources and education to enable social workers to assist victims with their pets.

Current literature in the field does not dispute the link between animal abuse and domestic violence.

Historically, to advance the field of social work and improve lives of abused and neglected children, social workers teamed up with the ASPCA to accomplish this goal. In this literature review, I address power and control, trauma and pet bonds, help-seeking behaviors among victims, social workers' attitudes and knowledge regarding human/animal bonds, reasons for delay leaving abusive relationships, and considering pets as family and not property. These themes are discussed in the following sections.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I searched databases for peer-reviewed articles using specific keywords to narrow searches. I used the following databases: APA PsycInfo, Education Source, CINAHL Plus with full text, Academic Search Complete, and SocIndex with full text.

I used the following search terms: *animal abuse, animal cruelty, animal maltreatment, domestic violence, domestic abuse, intimate partner violence, social work, social workers, social work practice, social services, animal abuse, family violence, pets, shelters, and trauma*. I searched for sources that were published between 2021 and 2025.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Hobfoll's conservation of resources theory was used as the foundation for this study. Hobfoll (1989) theorized stress affects people's mental and physical wellbeing. People use resources as a coping mechanism when experiencing stressors. According to Hobfoll (1989), "resources are defined as those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual, or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies" (p. 516). People acquire resources such as employment skills, knowledge, money, and support throughout life. They can also lose resources involuntarily if they lose jobs or become ill and have no family support. Often, resources can change throughout a person's life in terms of whether those they are no longer needed or have value (Hobfoll, 1989).

The more resources a person has, the more resilient they are when facing adversities in life (Hobfoll, 1989). For example, job loss is not as stressful or traumatic if savings accounts can be relied upon while searching for new jobs. Those without savings struggle to cope with their job loss until new jobs are found. Loss of resource can also become traumatic for, especially in cases involving involuntary job loss.

Hobfoll's conservation of resources theory was chosen for this study because it has not been applied to other studies in the field. This theory was used to support human/animal bonds victims share with their pets while in abusive relationships. It helps to emphasize that if victims are separated from their beloved pets, the experience can be traumatic and stressful. It is also traumatic and stressful for social workers who respond

to and assist victims with limited knowledge and resources and genuinely want to help victims but are unable to do so because of pets.

Human-pet bonds are a resource and a coping mechanism for victims within abusive relationships. Victims who face leaving their pets behind with abusers will feel stress regarding their pets' wellbeing. Sometimes, victims choose to remain homeless with their pets because they do not want to return to abusers and do not wish to be separated from their pets. Victims who seek help from local domestic violence shelters experience stress and trauma when they are told that shelters are unable to accommodate their pets (Voth Schrag et al., 2022).

Social workers also may experience stress and trauma when a victim presents to the shelter seeking assistance with their pet (Najmabadi et al., 2023; Voth Schrag et al., 2022). Social workers may lack the resources to assist the victim, such as gaining access to a pet-friendly hotel and will need to turn the victim away. If there is a lack of options for the victim because of the pet, the victim might choose to return to their abuser. Knowing that option is more dangerous and that the abuse can become more severe puts the victim at risk for death. This can cause significant trauma and stress to the social worker (Najmabadi et al., 2023; Voth Schrag et al., 2022).

Social workers lack the training and education in the human/animal bond. This can cause stress and trauma when a victim seeks help with their pet. The social worker may not ask about the pet or understand the importance of the pet to the victim. The social worker can become upset when a victim makes a decision, such as returning to the abuser for the well-being of the pet. Social workers might also be insensitive to the victim

due to a lack of personal ownership of a pet or a general dislike of pets. This could cause stress and trauma if the victim does not feel heard about their concerns for their pet's safety or the social worker does not understand or acknowledge the human/animal bond (Dale & Yeung, 2021; Randour et al., 2021).

The more resources a social worker has to assist victims with their will significantly reduce the stress and trauma the victim and the social worker experience when they arrive at the shelter for assistance. Understanding the stress and trauma social workers experience when assisting victims who own a pet will help policymakers allocate resources to assist both the victim and the pet.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

#### **Historical References**

Social work, a field that primarily seeks to help improve the lives of people starting to assist animals, would seem odd to many people. Many cities have animal shelters, rescues, and foster homes working with animals. In 1874, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals allied with social workers to bring justice to Mary Ellen Wilson (Jalongo, 2006; Mallon, 2013). A young girl severely abused by her foster parents was only able to be helped by an alliance with the ASPCA as animal abuse laws were stricter. As a result, the winning court case created the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Children in 1874 (Jalongo, 2006). Going forward, this society granted protection for children who will never have to endure the abuse Mary Ellen Wilson experienced. After this new advancement in social work, both disciplines went their separate ways.

Before the 1960s, researchers were aware that there could be links between animal and child abuse as well as domestic violence. However, it was not until the 1960s that Hellman and Blackman's (1966) research on violent inmates started to find and confirm the links between animal maltreatment, child abuse, and domestic violence. DeViney et al. (1983) continued to confirm these links found in their study of children. They found that 60% of their cases of abused and neglected children will show abusive behavior towards animals. This study helped to confirm domestic violence would be present in a home when an animal or child is showing signs of abuse and neglect.

Since the establishment of the link between domestic violence and animal maltreatment, the field of social work has yet to catch up. The current curriculum fails to acknowledge the human/animal bond, and as students transition to practice in the field, they also neglect to recognize the human/animal bond (Dale & Yeung, 2021). This failure to acknowledge the human/animal bond happened when both disciplines went their separate ways after the Mary Ellen Wilson case. Because of newer pet ownership trends, social workers need to be aware of the human/animal bond and recognize this bond when making treatment plans (Dale & Yeung, 2021). Otherwise, harm could be done to the client if pets are not considered, such as remaining homeless or continuing to be in an abusive relationship.

### **Domestic Violence and Animal Maltreatment**

Domestic violence exists in homes with or without pets. When the pet is present in the home, there is a chance that the pet will become a victim of abuse. In situations of domestic violence, the abuser will target those who are most vulnerable in the family

unit, such as pets and children, because they are unable to fight back (Campbell, 2021). They might also abuse the pet to gain a reaction from the victim.

Homes where there is domestic violence and pet ownership will experience more severe forms of abuse. The abuse can escalate to frequent sexual assaults, emotional abuse, and stalking (Collins et al., 2018). Anyone involved with social service agencies should be mindful of pet abuse within these families. Failure to ask about the pet's well-being can overlook the severity of abuse that may be happening in the home.

Children and victims form a strong bond with their pet, and the pet is often a source of comfort. When children witness animal abuse in the home, they will develop psychological problems later in life (Hawkins et al., 2019). Also, by witnessing the violence, children can later develop violent tendencies towards animals and will become perpetrators of abuse in future relationships (November, 2023; Vrečko, 2019).

Social service professionals who overlook or do not include pets in the treatment plan because of a lack of training or education can cause more harm to the victim and pet because the victim may choose to delay leaving the relationship because of the pet (Campbell, 2021; Cleary et al., 2021; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Kotzmann et al., 2022; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Vrečko, 2019).

Perpetrators who abuse animals will have a more extensive criminal history than those who do not abuse animals (Campbell, 2021). When there is a domestic violence incident, the abuser will flee the scene and is often not arrested. The perpetrators flee because they usually have a record or an arrest warrant. First responders who respond to domestic violence incidents should be aware of any pet abuse, which will help indicate

the severity of the violence, especially if the pet is showing signs of injury requiring veterinary care (Campbell, 2021).

While there are methodological and sampling issues, such as small sampling size, the studies (Barrett et al., 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Hawkins et al., 2019; Vrečko, 2019) all confirm the link between domestic violence and animal maltreatment.

Recognizing the pets as victims of domestic violence victims will help social workers formulate treatment plans that include the safety of the pet and will allow the victim to gain more confidence that they can safely leave the relationship without having to worry about the safety of their pet. Veterinary schools have started to recognize the link between animal abuse and family violence and are considering making policies to report animal abuse (Dale & Yeung, 2021). However, this can be problematic for the victim if services or law enforcement become involved and the victim is unable to leave the relationship. This could place the victim in more danger.

### **Power and Control**

Perpetrators will use pets as a form of power and control over the victim.

Threatening to harm or kill the pet keeps the victim compliant with the abuser's demands (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Women at domestic violence shelters who reported threats to their pets were five times more likely to experience violence (Barrett et al., 2022). Barrett et al. (2022) also suggested that violence is more severe in relationships where coercive methods are used as opposed to relationships where violence is present but in the absence of coercive behavior.

Although it is accepted within the scholarly community that pets are used as a means of power and control over the victim, this was determined by interviews with survivors at shelters. No study has been conducted with perpetrators of abuse as participants to confirm the reasoning that pets are used as a form of power and control (Barrett et al., 2020; Cleary et al., 2021; Giesbrecht, 2022). Research has focused chiefly on animal maltreatment perpetrated by children, which is a precursor to violent behavior later in life (Alleyne & Parfitt, 2019).

Furthermore, Dutton and Goodman (2005) discussed that violence is a tool used within relationships that the perpetrator uses to gain power in a relationship. Other forms of coercion include isolation and intimidation. Perpetrators will also withhold necessities such as money, cell phones, and internet access to maintain power over the victim.

Power and control as a reason for animal abuse within a violent relationship is a common theme that is accepted within the scholarly community; however, Dutton and Goodman (2005) point out that little research has been conducted on the construct and definition of coercive control. Verbal abuse and kidnapping could be considered coercive control. More research is needed in this area. Perpetrators who use threats of harm or violence towards a pet as a way to control the victim force the victim to remain longer in the relationship when they are unable to leave with their pet or lack resources for the safekeeping of their pet.

### **Trauma and Pet Bonds**

Pets can provide a positive source of comfort for victims who experience abuse within a relationship as they form a strong bond with their pet (Cleary et al., 2021;

Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Hawkins et al., 2019; Rauktis & Hoy-Gerlach, 2020). Victims and children who reside in the home would become upset and experience trauma when they witness the pet being abused.

Hawkins et al. (2019) found that pets are moderators as children and victims have a positive relationship with their pet despite the violence within the home. The pets were a positive source of comfort. It also allowed the victims a reprieve from the abuse if the pet needed to be walked. It would help the victim destress temporarily away from their environment.

When victims presented to the shelter, they would discuss the strong bond they have with their pet with social workers. Social workers are often trained and taught to focus on the human aspect of social work (Laing, 2021). When social workers focus solely on the person and disregard their concerns for their pet, they will put the victim in danger because they will make decisions based on their pet's well-being and may return to the abuser.

Yeung et al. (2020) found in their online survey that some professionals who assist victims understand that a pet is a barrier to receiving services but are limited in the resources that can be utilized. Participants in the survey also identified that they did not have any formal training in assisting victims with pets. Generalizability with this survey is difficult since only 140 participants responded. Another study found that social workers did not ask about the victim's pet, and the authors advocated for more formal training (Randour et al., 2021). When victims have a strong bond with their pet, it will

impact their decision-making process. Pets also help victims heal from the trauma experienced in the relationship (November, 2023).

### **Help-Seeking Behavior**

Many victims will try to seek help when violence is present in a relationship and will often reach out to family and friends for support first before considering any formal interventions. For many victims, because the abuser has isolated them from their family and friends, they will lack support in getting help from family and friends (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Researchers have started focusing on the factors determining when a victim will seek help from outside sources. Victims will start to seek help when there are more frequent and violent forms of abuse, experience an injury, and fear that their life is in danger (Barrett et al., 2022). When pets are present in the home, victims are reluctant to seek help because they fear for the pet's safety and lack the resources to keep it safe. Victims will delay leaving the relationship because they fear for their pet's safety (Giesbrecht, 2022).

When there is severe violence and victims witness acts of animal maltreatment, victims begin to fear for their lives. When victims fear for their lives, it creates an urgency to leave the relationship (Barrett et al., 2022). Owning a pet can create barriers for the victims and prevent them from seeking help. Barrett et al. (2022) discusses limitations with the reasoning behind help-seeking behavior due to the small sample sizes of victims who accessed shelters. There is no research that is based on a community sample of victims who left an abusive relationship and had help from other forms of support such as family or friends.

## **Living in Fear**

In homes where there is pet abuse, victims experience more severe abuse and, as a result, will often report fearing for their lives (Campbell, 2021). They will also report fearing for the well-being of the pet. In a study, Campbell (2021) found that victims often wait 20-40 incidents before calling law enforcement because of their pet's well-being. This is a significant number of incidents compared to victims who do not own a pet and will only wait ten incidents before calling authorities.

Victims who own pets endure 20-40 incidents of abuse before calling authorities because the perpetrator will most likely have prior charges and will flee the scene to avoid getting arrested (Campbell, 2021). Law enforcement should check on the well-being of pets within a home, and if there are signs of abuse, it would indicate that more severe abuse is happening within the home. Barrett et al. (2022) found that animal abuse was a significant predictor for victims feeling threatened for their lives because of the increased severity of abuse.

Covid-19 increased domestic violence within the home and caused people to fear for their lives (Campbell, 2020). Victims had little to no resources for help during the pandemic lockdown. The lockdown caused victims to be stuck in their environment and, because of the severe abuse, fear for their lives. It is unknown the amount or severity of abuse the pandemic caused. More research in this area is needed to understand fully the extent of abuse victims endured while under lockdown.

## **COVID-19**

Domestic violence increases when there are natural disasters. Domestic violence increased 46% after Mount Saint Helen's eruption and 35% during Hurricane Katrina (Campbell, 2020). Covid-19 would not be an exception. Currently, there are only estimated guesses about the amount of domestic violence, and the violence is believed to be greater than current estimates due to the length of time the government mandates and lockdowns lasted.

The Covid-19 virus was a shock to the world. It caused governments to implement social distancing, lockdowns, and closures of businesses, schools, and other public places. 1 in 4 adults began to have mental health issues because of the loneliness and lack of social interaction caused by the pandemic (Martos Martinez-Caja et al., 2022). As a result, people turned to animal shelters and started to adopt pets to curb the loneliness and isolation. Pets positively affect human well-being and improve owners' quality of life (Campbell, 2020). Pets acted as a coping mechanism for their owners who experienced depression, anxiety, and lack of support. Owners became attached to their pets and considered them part of the family. There was an increase in pet adoption as people wanted relief from social isolation, and the pet would help them cope with the pandemic stressors.

While pets were helpful to those who were lonely and isolated, covid-19 became victims of violence's worst nightmare. Victims who were isolated away from their friends and family were even more isolated with the lockdown. Shelters, public libraries, and other public places that victims may have turned to for assistance were also closed

(Campbell, 2020). The stressors of the pandemic that caused unemployment, reduced income, lack of support, isolation, and lack of coping increased the chances of violence within the home. There were no safe ways for victims to leave an abusive relationship with or without a pet.

An unintended consequence of the pandemic led many people to abandon their pets because they could no longer care for them (Vučinić et al., 2022). There was even fear that pets could transmit the Covid-19 virus, leading to increased pet abandonment (Morgan et al., 2020). While people were adopting pets, shelters were filling up with new animals. As violence increased in homes, victims, and pets were in danger and often were in fear for their lives because there was no information as to when the lockdown would end, and society would return to normal.

### **Social Workers' Attitudes and Knowledge**

Social workers play a vital role in assisting clients with their needs. They can connect patients to vital resources to improve the well-being of their lives. When social workers do not have the resources needed to assist clients, this could significantly impact their quality of life and well-being. There is not enough training or education for social workers in recognizing the human/animal bond. Schools that have social work curriculums only focus on the human client (Laing, 2021). When this bond is not recognized, social workers can become frustrated when clients make decisions based on their pet's well-being and safety. Social workers must be aware of the human/animal bond when working with vulnerable populations.

Ignoring the human/animal bond is becoming impossible with the current pet ownership trends. However, 90% of social workers reported having no formal training when assisting clients who own a pet (Yeung et al., 2020). Many social workers would need to learn on the job and through experiences. Some studies have found that social workers often would not screen victims about pets in the home (Arkow, 2020; Barrett et al., 2022; Randour et al., 2021). This could impact a client's decision making and following through with their treatment plan.

Attempts have been made to assist social workers in understanding the human/animal bond. Hoy-Gerlach et al. (2019) study placed social workers to intern at animal shelters. Social workers could see firsthand the problems the shelter faced with its day-to-day operations. The study aimed to help social workers recognize the human/animal bond and think about pets when working with clients. This could include assisting their clients in finding pet food banks, free clinics for vet care, domestic violence shelters, and assistance with grief and loss issues. This study helped social workers recognize the importance of pets in their clients' lives.

Recognizing and including pets in treatment plans will benefit the client and the populations that the social worker serves. Research has suggested ways for social workers to assist their clients, such as looking into the welfare of pets when investigating abuse cases or networking with local animal shelters and fosters to assist when a pet needs placement (Arkow, 2020). While these suggestions are important, more research needs to be done to determine if the suggestions are feasible for social workers working with these populations.

Strides have been made in other fields, such as veterinary practices, where veterinarians attempt to incorporate social work into their field. They are starting to recognize signs of animal abuse and domestic violence (Dale & Yeung, 2021). However, Arkow (2020) advocates that veterinarians should give clients information and resources about domestic violence. While veterinarians recognize the need to report domestic violence, it does place them in ethical dilemmas such as maintaining the safety of the victim and the pet. They might not be able to keep the pet away from the abuser due to limited space at the facility as well as a lack of resources to assist the victim.

### **Delays Leaving Relationships**

Lack of resources and lack of awareness of safety planning prevents victims from being able to leave their abusive relationship. Steps to assist victims with a pet have been taken, such as protective orders that include pets, foster homes, pet-friendly hotels, and local shelters (Arkow, 2020). However, there is not enough supply to meet the needs of the victims.

In a telephone survey, Fitzgerald et al. (2021) found that many respondents delayed leaving a relationship due to a pet and additionally reported experiencing more severe forms of abuse. The study also validated that if the abuser were abusing humans, the pet would be abused as well. However, their study was limited because the authors added their own questions without determining if the questions added were valid and reliable. Kotzmann et al. (2022) point out in their study that domestic and animal violence might be higher because victims might withhold information when responding to telephone interviews or questionnaires.

Many researchers support the idea that victims will delay leaving a relationship because they fear for the safety of their pet. It is unknown how many victims continue to stay in an abusive relationship because of the well-being of their pet (November, 2023). Victims have reported more severe abuse in homes where pet abuse is present (Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Vrečko, 2019). Many victims witness abuse of their pet, and because of the human/animal bond and the positive relationship victims have with their pet, they will be reluctant to leave them behind when they wish to leave the relationship. November (2023) discussed by adding more federal funding to domestic violence shelters towards more resources for pets will help reduce the number of victims who delay leaving a relationship because of a pet.

### **Pets as Family and not Property**

Many people who own a pet say it is part of their family. While this might be true for most people who own a pet, legally, pets are considered property, not family. Pets are a positive source of comfort and coping for people. However, some people who own pets do not consider them a social source (Martos Martinez-Caja et al., 2022).

Pets are viewed as property, which can pose barriers to protecting them from abusers. Fitzgerald et al. (2021) argue that the law should change, and pets should not be considered property. Protection from abuse orders have changed to include pets. However, if the pet is living in the home with the abuser, there is no guarantee the pet will remain safe. Historically, animals were believed not to experience pain or psychological trauma. Kotzmann et al. (2022) found that pets will suffer from psychological conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive

disorder, anxiety, and other mental health issues as well as pain. Because pets can experience trauma and pain, it is essential that they are legally protected and considered victims of domestic violence. There is some difficulty with considering pets as victims of violence due to their legal status as property. If a victim flees a relationship and wants to take the pet, but the abuser owns the pet, it can be challenging to get the pet to a safer environment.

Viewing a pet as a victim of abuse can create a change in thinking for social workers. Social workers can be more mindful of pets in the home and their well-being. It will also help create awareness of family members' strong human/animal bond with their pets (Hawkins et al., 2019).

### **Court Cases**

In July 2010, Mark Weeks murdered his three-year-old daughter Alexis McClain. Mark would beat his daughter frequently for urinating in her bed or her clothes. He would shake and slam her head against a wall. An autopsy showed hematomas in her brain and skull fractures. The blunt force was strong enough to push her eye out of the socket (People v. Weeks, 2015). Evidence of Mark Weeks abusing the family's pets was entered into evidence to show his violent nature. Weeks would slam the family's cat against the wall by its throat for inappropriate urination. The family's puppy had to be given away due to the family's fear for its safety when Mark slammed its head against a wall for inappropriate urination (People v. Weeks, 2015). Weeks argued against the evidence of the animal maltreatment being allowed in court because it made a biased view of him as an angry individual. The Colorado Supreme Court held their ruling that evidence of

previous animal maltreatment could be entered into evidence that substantiates that Mark Weeks was an extremely violent individual.

Karen Corbin was living in a motel with her husband, Rodney Oglesby. She had found an injured kitten and took it back to their motel to care for it. The next day, Oglesby murdered the kitten by shaking it and then throwing the body away in a nearby dumpster. He also started destroying the motel room. Oglesby then began beating Karen. He hit her multiple times in the face, causing numbness in her cheeks and a continuous bloody nose. He would often drag her by her hair, causing a large amount of hair loss (People v Oglesby, 2008). Karen tried to leave her husband multiple times, but Oglesby would often restrain her. Oglesby pleaded guilty to committing domestic violence with corporal injury, aggravated assault, and committing animal cruelty by killing a kitten (People V. Oglesby).

These court cases (People v Oglesby, 2008; People v. Weeks, 2015) show that people who abuse animals go on to commit more extreme violence that could be lethal. Courts that grant protective orders are not enough to protect humans and their pets from violent individuals. It is essential that victims are given the ability to leave an abusive relationship with the safety of their pet and have enough resources to assist them in preventing them from returning to the relationship. Social workers who recognize the human/animal bond or ask about family pets with victims who arrive at the shelter can prevent more extreme forms of violence by including the family pet in their treatment plan, giving the victim more confidence to leave the relationship without fearing for the safety of their pet.

## Summary and Conclusions

There is a link between animal abuse and domestic violence (Alleyne & Parfitt, 2019; Arkow, 2020; Barrett et al., 2022; Barrett et al., 2020; Campbell, 2020; Cleary et al., 2021; Dale & Yeung, 2021; Giesbrecht, 2022; Kotzmann et al., 2022; November, 2023). When animal abuse is present, victims experience more severe forms of abuse, which could result in lethal violence (Barrett et al., 2020; Gutowski & Goodman, 2023; McFarlane et al., 2015, Messing et al., 2021; Stevenson et al., 2018). Victims delay leaving relationships because they have no resources to keep their pets safe, or abusers own pets (Campbell, 2021; Cleary et al., 2021; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Kotzmann et al., 2022; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Vrečko, 2019).

Domestic violence shelters lack accommodations for victims with pets, and social workers often do not inquire about pets. Lack of understanding about human/animal bonds impacts decision-making processes, and victims make decisions based on well-being of their pets. Victims who make decisions based on their pets' safety and wellbeing could be in significant danger if they return to abusers or choose homelessness because of their pets (Laing, 2021; November, 2023). Abuser also use pets as sources of power and control over victims, making escaping from relationships challenging.

Victims need to be able to leave abusive relationships without barriers. The COVID-19 pandemic increased those barriers, and victims lived in fear for their lives. Even when they accessed social services, social workers lacked knowledge about human/animal bonds to effectively assist victims. Social workers failed to ask about family pets and did not incorporate them in treatment plans. This caused stress and

trauma to both social workers and victims when victims made decisions against treatment plans to ensure wellbeing of their pets (Laing, 2021; Stevenson et al., 2018).

It is unknown how many people were affected by domestic violence during the pandemic. It is also unknown how many victims remain in abusive relationships because of their pets. There is a lack of information regarding experiences and barriers social workers face when trying to assist victims of domestic violence who own pets.

The aim of this proposed study is to fill the gap in understanding experiences and barriers social workers face when assisting victims of domestic violence who own pets. Knowledge from the study can assist schools designing social work curricula to include human/animal bonds. It will also assist policymakers to strengthen laws to protect pets as victims of abuse and not as property. I identified barriers social workers faced when assisting victims. Resources can be allocated to assist social workers to reduce those barriers and allow victims to leave relationships safely and without worry for their pets' wellbeing. These new resources will help prevent victims from returning to relationships and placing themselves in danger.

Understanding experiences of social workers when assisting victims of domestic violence who own pets will lead to more insights regarding barriers and problems social workers face when assisting victims. Chapter 3 includes information about the methodology and research design.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

Social workers work to help improve lives of populations they serve. There is a lack of scholarly information regarding lived experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own pets. The purpose of this study is to explore, describe, and understand lived experiences of this population. This will help to lessen the stress and trauma social workers experience when they are unable to assist victims because of their pets or when they witness victims make decisions regarding their pets' wellbeing.

Through understanding these experiences, new resources can be implemented to assist those who work with this population. Not only will it lessen stress and trauma they experience, but it will also lessen stress and trauma for victims. Having more resources helps prevent victims from returning to abusers and risking severe injury or death (Barrett et al., 2020; Gutowski & Goodman, 2023; Stevenson et al., 2018). Chapter 3 includes the research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, methodology, participant selection logic, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation, data collection, data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and a chapter summary.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research questions for this phenomenological study are:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own a pet?

RQ2: What barriers do social workers experience when assisting victims of domestic violence who own a pet?

**Rationale**

The central phenomenon of this study was stress and trauma social workers experience when trying to assist victims who own pets. Hobfoll's theory of conservation of resources was the theoretical framework for this study. When social workers lack resources and knowledge to assist victims of domestic violence who own pets, they see victims make decisions based on their pets' wellbeing. While prioritizing their pets, victims could experience becoming homeless and facing dangers involved with living on the street or abandoning or surrendering their pets, which could cause more stress and trauma to victims as they formed strong bonds with their pets. Victims may also return to their abusers.

Victims and pets who live with abusers experience more frequent severe abuse (Barrett et al., 2020; Campbell, 2021; Gutowski & Goodman, 2023; Stevenson et al., 2018). Victims experience significant stress and trauma because of violence and witnessing threats and violence towards their pets. More stress and trauma can be experienced by victims when they arrive at domestic violence shelters and are unable to bring their pets. Because victims are then faced with having to remain homeless, surrendering or abandoning pets, or returning to abusers, social workers experience trauma and stress because they are unintentionally putting victims back into harm's way. Social workers do not have enough resources or knowledge to assist victims who own pets.

Phenomenology was used for this study. Phenomenology involves addressing lived experiences involving a particular phenomenon. This approach is used to

understand those lived experiences. I used the interpretive phenomenological design for participants to describe their experiences in their own terms and focus on particular moments.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I was the primary data collector for this study. I was an observer/participant as I conducted semi-structured interviews. I did not have any personal or professional relationships with participants. I managed bias by using epoché and bracketing. I suspended any judgments and biases while conducting interviews and analyzing data. I used journaling to write down any preconceived notions, judgments, and biases. The purpose of using journaling was to be aware of all potential biases that could influence the study. This allowed for transparency and credibility.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study involved exploring experiences of social workers who responded to and assisted victims of domestic violence who owned pets. Prior studies have examined experiences from victims' perspectives, and some quantitative research has been conducted using responses from professionals in the field, including social workers. Understanding experiences of social workers will lead to more insights regarding barriers and attitudes social workers experience when assisting victims with pets.

## **Participant Selection Logic**

### ***Participants***

Social workers have a variety of education and licensing requirements. They can have bachelor's or master's degrees and may or may not be licensed. Some roles require social workers to be licensed. For example, some hospitals require social workers to have master's degrees and licenses. For this study, there was no requirement for level of education or license to be eligible to participate in this study. Eligible participants were required to work or have worked at domestic violence shelters in social worker roles.

Social workers who worked for domestic violence shelters were participants for this study. Social workers have clinical knowledge and interact the most with victims who own pets. They are able to create and implement treatment plans for clients. Social workers also tell victims that they cannot accommodate pets. All participants were required to be social workers who worked at domestic violence shelters and had experiences with victims who owned pets.

### ***Sampling***

Convenience and snowball sampling were used for this study. Convenience sampling was chosen because it is used to find participants due to time constraints, locality, and cost. However, a limitation with this sampling method as it sometimes does not result in data-rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Snowball sampling was also used. Participants were asked if they knew about anyone who would meet criteria for the study and refer them. Contact information was provided to participants.

Participants were recruited through social media and letters to local domestic violence shelters. Participants were able to contact me by phone or email. I expected a total of six to 10 participants were needed for this study, or until saturation was achieved. Data saturation is achieved when no new information or insights are gained from participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As data analysis began, themes emerged. Data saturation can occur with a small sample size with as few as six participants.

### **Instrumentation**

An interview protocol will be used as the primary data collection method. It will be a semi-structured interview constructed of 10 interview questions focused on the experiences of the social workers who work at the shelter and their experiences working with victims who own a pet. Questions will focus on building rapport and exploring social worker's experiences working at the shelter.

A digital audio recorder will be used to record in-person sessions and video sessions over Zoom. Audio will be saved on a secure server on a password-protected laptop. The audio will then be transcribed for data analysis.

The interview protocol will be the main tool of data collection. This will allow me to understand the experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims who own a pet. The digital recorder will allow me to transcribe the data rather than relying on memory and notes from the interview.

### **Researcher-developed Instruments**

A semi-structured interview will be used to collect data. Open-ended questions that focus on the experiences social workers have while working at the domestic violence

shelter. Using Hobfoll's (1989) theory of conservation of resources, the interview questions will focus on the participants' experiences particularly on any stressors or trauma experienced while working with victims who own a pet. All participants will be asked the same questions to ensure validity of the study. The interview protocol will be open-ended to allow for rich data to be collected. With an open-ended format, I will be able to ask probing or follow up questions for more clarity.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Participants will be recruited by using flyers containing the study's information, which will be sent to domestic violence shelters and using social media to find participants. A flyer will also be posted through the Office of Doctoral Research under the Walden University Research Participant Pool. If permission is given, a flyer will also be sent to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) to recruit participants. After initial interviews with participants, participants will be able to refer new participants using the snowball method.

### ***Participants***

Participants will be able to contact me via email or phone. A preliminary screening will be done to ensure that they meet the requirements of the study. Participants will be included if they are a social worker who works at a domestic violence shelter and have had at least one experience with a victim who owned a pet. Participants who do not meet the criteria for this study will be excluded. Participants will need to sign and give informed consent and once this is signed and returned to me an interview can be scheduled.

### ***Data Collection***

Data will be collected from the semi-structured interviews with the social workers. I will be the primary data collector for this study. As participants respond to the recruitment requests and meet the criteria, they will be scheduled for interviews.

Interviews and data will be collected until data saturation occurs. Saturation occurs when the participants present no new information compared to those who have already been interviewed. Data will be recorded by using a digital recorder for Zoom meetings, and phone interviews. At the beginning of all interviews, informed consent will be reiterated, and participants reminded of their rights as a participant, including but not limited to discontinuing participation at any time without any repercussion. Participants will have an opportunity at the end of the interview to ask any questions they have regarding the study and how the data will be used.

After the data has been collected, the interview will then be transcribed and stored on a secure server on a password-protected laptop. Copies of the transcribed interviews will be sent by email to the participants to ensure accuracy in their responses. Participants will have the opportunity to correct any statements or have a follow-up interview if needed.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Interviews will be transcribed by hand or through a transcription service. Microsoft word also has limited ability to transcribe recordings which may also be used. Open coding will be used to analyze the data. I will look for themes from the data corresponding to the themes found in the literature review. The goal of the data analysis

is to get to the essence of the experience and learn how it came to be (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I will also look for themes that show stress and trauma through Hobfoll's (1989) theory of conservation of resources. Data will be coded by hand. Atlas Ti. is a software used to assist with coding and analyzing the data. Depending on the nature of the data, Atlas Ti. may be used to assist in the analysis process.

While it is reasonable to find data that supports the chosen theory or themes for the study, it is also important to search for alternative explanations. While there is a chance that there might not be data to support an alternative finding, using discrepant case analysis will help to show any alternative findings. Discrepant analysis helps to show that the data has been viewed from all angles and prevents bias.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research focuses in four areas: credibility, which is the trustfulness in the research; transferability, which tells us if the findings can be generalized; dependability, which is how the study can be replicated; and confirmability, to prevent bias (Peoples, 2021). These steps help keep the research trustworthy and repeatable.

#### **Credibility**

To ensure credibility in this study, I will utilize member checks. The participants will be able to give me feedback regarding the accuracy of the transcribed interview and preliminary analysis of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants will be able to confirm the accuracy of the meanings behind the findings which will prevent any misinterpretation of the data. I will also use reflexivity and discuss my own biases and

assumptions about the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I will also have my chair and committee member peer review the data to determine if the findings are plausible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data saturation will end further collection of data if the data no longer shows any new insights to the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### **Transferability**

Thick description will be used to provide evidence in the form of quotes from interviews, journals, and any field notes so that readers can determine if this study can fit into other contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Maximum variation would be ideal for this study; however, it may not be possible with the small number of participants.

Geographic variability may also be an issue with this study. Participants may come from a certain area, and their experiences may differ greatly from those of social workers in other areas. This study could offer insights for other health care professions, such as primary care doctors or hospitals, who come into contact with patients who own a pet.

### **Dependability**

An audit trail details decisions about the study and how the researcher reached their conclusions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I will provide an audit trail detailing how data will be collected, how the data will be analyzed, and any decisions or conclusions I have made about the study.

### **Confirmability**

To minimize any bias with this study, I will use epoch, which is suspending all judgments. I will also use journaling and write down my personal biases and assumptions that can affect the study's findings. Reflexivity can be used to show how the researcher's

position can affect the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I will use reflexivity to clarify any assumptions I have about the study.

### **Ethical Procedures**

It is essential to maintain ethics when conducting research with human subjects. The ultimate goal is to ensure that no harm comes to the participants. Steps are put in place to prevent unethical treatment of human subjects such as IRB approval, informed consent, and the treatment of data, storage, and confidentiality. Interviews will be kept confidential. Interviews will be recorded using a digital recorder, and a number will be assigned to each file. The digital recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected laptop. Only my committee members and I will have access to the data. Any paper documents will be locked in a filing cabinet located in my home. All data and files will be destroyed after five years. Any paper files will be shredded.

### **IRB Approval**

The IRB will need to approve the study prior to any participant being contacted or any collection of data. I will receive an IRB approval number. Once I receive approval, I can begin to collect data.

### **Informed Consent**

Participants will be provided with an informed consent that must be signed before any interviews are conducted. Participants will be made aware that their participation in this study is voluntary, and they can stop at any moment. I will remind the participants that they can stop at any time at the beginning of the interview.

In interviewing participants there may be a chance that a participant may disclose unethical or illegal behavior. As a state-mandated reporter, I will have to discuss this issue with my committee and make a report with the appropriate authorities. To mitigate these instances, I will remind the participants that I am a state mandated reporter and that if they were to disclose any information that is unethical or illegal, it would need to be reported. Participants will be provided with a list of mental health providers should any stress or trauma occur during any stage of the study.

### **Summary**

To best address research questions, a qualitative approach was needed. Issues of trustworthiness were addressed and mitigated. The main data collection method was semi-structured interviews. With any research that involves human participants, it is essential safeguards are in place to minimize harm that could come from research. The IRB reviewed the proposed study to ensure it met ethical standards. Informed consent was needed before interviews took place. Data will be stored on a secure laptop and destroyed after 5 years. Chapter 4 includes data analysis and results of the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, describe, and understand lived experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own pets. This study will help understand barriers, stressors, and trauma social workers experience when assisting these victims. The following research questions were used to address the problem:

RQ1: What is the lived experience of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own a pet?

RQ2: What barriers do social workers experience when assisting victims of domestic violence who own a pet?

This chapter includes demographics of participants, data collection methods, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and a summary.

### **Setting**

Participants were recruited through UserInterviews and Research and Me recruitment platforms. They answered preliminary screening questions, and once approved for the study, they signed informed consent forms before interviews were scheduled. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, and prior to interviews, participants were rescreened to ensure eligibility for the study. No participant was known by me prior to the study.

### **Demographics**

Four of seven participants currently worked at domestic violence shelters, and three participants previously worked at domestic violence shelters. Six participants

identified as female, and one identified as male. All participants owned pets and felt that pets were part of their families.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Participant/age	Gender	Currently works/have worked at a shelter	Number of years of experience working as a social worker
1. 43	Female	Currently works	11 years
2. 24	Female	Had worked	4 years
3. 28	Female	Currently works	4 years
4. 34	Female	Currently works	11 years
5. 41	Female	Had worked	18 years
6. 34	Male	Had worked	3 years
7. 61	Female	Currently works	6 years

**Data Collection**

Qualitative data were collected from seven interviewed participants using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A). Zoom interviews were conducted in a private room at my home. Interviews were scheduled at times of participants' choosing per the schedule I created on UserInterviews. Once participants signed informed consent forms and selected interview times, Zoom links were emailed to them. When interviews started, I greeted and thanked them for participating in the study. I also rescreened participants using prescreening questions to ensure they matched inclusion criteria for the study. Interviews lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour in length. Interviews were recorded via

Zoom, and a digital audio recorder was used as a backup method in case there was a problem with the Zoom recording.

All participants were asked the same 10 questions from the interview guide, along with followup and probing questions when necessary to gain clarity and understanding regarding their experience. I printed copies of my interview questions, so any notes or thoughts that occurred during interviews were communicated specifically for each participant. A sample of six to 10 participants is recommended for a phenomenological study of this type (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). However, after the seventh interview, no new information was found, and I determined data saturation had occurred.

Initially, participants were going to be recruited through social media platforms. I received a few emails regarding interest in the study, but potential participants asked if incentives were provided. After a few weeks with no interest in the study, I researched UserInterviews and Research and Me recruiting platforms. UserInterviews was an all-inclusive platform; however, they also encouraged incentives. After receiving IRB approval to use Research and Me and UserInterviews, participants were found, and \$35 was provided once interviews were completed.

### **Data Analysis**

Microsoft Transcribe was used to transcribe interviews. I verified transcripts by listening to audio files and making corrections to transcripts. After reviewing transcripts, I began the first level of coding by using in-vivo coding. In-vivo coding is used to help keep participants' views and experiences in mind while identifying categories and themes (Saldaña, 2021). I copied all important words, phrases, and stories and transferred them

to a new document. After printing this document, I reviewed codes to determine patterns and themes. For my second cycle of coding, I rereviewed in-vivo codes and separated them into themes. I then wrote out each theme and placed codes in accordance with corresponding themes. I also created a visual map of themes to determine their relationships with each other.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is necessary to be repeatable. It is also necessary for researchers to replicate studies (Peoples, 2021). Evidence of trustworthiness shows researchers follow the highest ethical standards.

### **Credibility**

Member checking was used to ensure credibility, clarify participant statements that were unclear or confusing, and ensure data were not misinterpreted. Reflexivity was also used to identify my assumptions, biases, and worldviews that could influence findings. I used reflexivity and reflected on my own thoughts about data and discussed biases with my chair regarding my interpretations of data. My chair also reviewed and confirmed findings of this study.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is a measure of determining if findings are generalizable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Quotes from participants were used for thick descriptions to help determine if the study could apply to other contexts. Maximum variation was not likely due to the small number of participants, who were located all over the United States. Geographic variability was an issue with this study. Social workers had different

experiences due to some states having more resources that are allocated for domestic violence than others.

### **Dependability**

Audit trails are used to address how decisions are made about data and conclusions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). An audit trail was used to show how decisions were made regarding how data were collected and analyzed as well as conclusions from data.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability involves being objective and minimizing biases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Epoche was used to suspend all judgments when studying this phenomenon. In a phenomenological study, suspending judgments is critical to understanding the phenomenon. Reflexivity was also used to determine biases and preconceived assumptions about the study. Biases and assumptions were journaled and shared with my chair.

## **Results**

Social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own pets often face barriers, stressors, and trauma when assisting these victims. Exploring these experiences was crucial to understanding problems social workers face on a daily basis (see Table 2).

### **Table 2**

#### *Research Questions and Themes*

##### *RQ1*

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Social worker identity Pet is family	Stress and Trauma Vulnerability
<i>RQ2</i>	
Resiliency Resources and barriers	

**Table 3***Themes and Categories*

Social Worker Identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Description of self</li> </ul>	Pet is Family <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• View of pet</li> <li>• Pet ownership</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Experience with pet</li> </ul>	Stress and Trauma <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coping</li> </ul>
Vulnerability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breaking rules</li> <li>• Fear</li> </ul>	Resiliency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loopholes</li> <li>• Rule Breaking</li> </ul>	Resources and Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wishlist</li> <li>• Needs/Wants</li> <li>• Problems</li> </ul>

**Lived Experiences of Social Workers**

Four primary themes were found throughout the data analysis that help to understand the lived experience of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own a pet. All the participants previously owned or currently own a pet, which they all felt helped them connect to the victims. In the opening conversation of the interview, participants would talk about themselves as a social worker. This gave a sense that the participants strongly identified with their role as a social worker, and the need to help others was apparent. Many of the participants described themselves as nurturers and empaths with the love of helping others. Their love of helping others was a driving motivator, and that money was not a factor in why they wanted to help others. These social workers genuinely want to help others in their time of need (see Table 4).

**Table 4***Social Worker Identity*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Response</i>
P1	“I feel like I get to be a part of a team that really truly provides actual tangible resources for people in our community. You know, I love that.”
P2	“I’m very passionate about helping people, I really resonate with. It just aligns with what I like to do.”
P3	“I like it so much because it is touching the hearts of humans. I am passionate about human beings and their safety.”
P4	“You have to like listening and helping people. It’s a where there is never a day that I am going to know it all.”
P5	“I love being with people, I’ve always felt connected to people. I like being with them in their hardest times in life.”
P6	“I like having the opportunity to help people kind of catch their breath again after traumatic events. Showing them how to connect to resources and taking advantage of those resources.”
P7	“I love helping and taking care of people. I took a \$10.00 on hour pay cut to do this job, so it’s not about the money.”

**Pets as Family**

The data showed that the participants felt that pets were a part of the family, from their own experience of owning a pet to seeing the victims with their pets. Viewing the pet as a family member helped the participant connect to the victim and connect with them on a deeper level. Their empathy towards the victim and their pet helped the victim feel safe and comfortable (see Table 5).

**Table 5***Pets as Family*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Response</i>
P1	“The sensitivity with how you treat domestic violence victims, you know you count the pets as part of their family.”
P2	“I thought it was amazing that they had gone through so much and they didn’t leave their animal behind or they didn’t want them left behind.”

- P3 “They have a close connection, and I think that I should preserve that. It’s hard for people who really love pets. It’s so hard to separate.”
- P4 “They feel like their family. It causes them to do the work. You can’t sit around and be at the shelter all day and not do anything.”
- P5 “It breaks my heart because I am a person that sees pets as family.”
- P6 “I treat them like it’s my child. I treat him like he’s a small little baby”.
- P7 “You can’t throw them out just because they have a pet. That’s part of their family.”
- 

Participants also noticed how the victims felt about their pets. Participant 2 discussed that the victims were very attached to their pet and did not want to separate from them. Participant 4 also acknowledges how pets are also victims of domestic violence and can be the reason why a victim would choose to stay with the abuser.

P2 said: I think there's a lot of attachment I very much dealt with crisis, so I would often see them kind of like holding on to their animals often stroking them. The lady with the dog very frequently needed her eyes on him. And then the lady with her cat was kind of like the same. She wouldn't let her go. And then obviously the younger girl with her hamster, she was attached. They're very caring. There's almost like anxiety surrounding their pets because they don't wanna lose them. They don't wanna let them go. They're afraid. There's definitely a lot of love. They're clearly very bonded and going through a difficult time.

P4 said: It breaks my heart because I am a person that sees pets as family. I absolutely think that pets are a part of the family and pets are at risk for violence. Sometimes even more than the humans in the relationship, you know they'll get

kicked, thrown, abused and so yeah, knowing that sometimes a that pets didn't get brought along is heartbreaking or worse yet that women are staying in these relationships because there aren't opportunities for their pets.

### **Stress and Trauma**

When social workers were asked if they had any traumatic or stressful experiences while working with victims who own a pet, interestingly, they all stated no. Even though the social workers would, at times, describe stressful or even dangerous situations, they would describe hearing horror stories from the victims about the pets or witnessing their coworkers experience situations. It was perplexing that the social workers did not feel any of their experiences were stressful or traumatic. For example, P4 said:

We could get hurt regardless because their abuser could find out what they are and come here and hurt us. Their abuser could have followed them. They could have tracking on their phone and know where we are. We kind of run that risk every day because of what we chose. I'm like the same way you're afraid that it wasn't a rabid dog because I mean eventually he calmed down. That's how a man is when he's angry. When a man is angry, he could have a lethal weapon. A dog will bite you. A man could shoot you like so. It's like if anything, a human can hurt us more than a dog can.

The data was explored further to determine if an alternative explanation could be determined as to why social workers did not experience stress or trauma while working with victims who own a pet (see Table 6).

**Table 6***Stress and Trauma*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Participant responses</i>
<i>P1</i>	<i>“Sometimes, you may not know everything that’s going on with the pet just by looking at them. Yeah, some of the horror stories I’ve heard with pets.”</i>
<i>P2</i>	<i>“I wouldn’t say anything caused by them, but sometimes the stories that they share.”</i>
<i>P3</i>	<i>“I haven’t had any traumatic experience with victims and their pet.”</i>
<i>P4</i>	<i>“It wasn’t my experience; it was my coworker’s.”</i>
<i>P5</i>	<i>“Not really, I can’t think of anything traumatic in terms of a DV relationship with our pets.”</i>
<i>P6</i>	<i>“The hardest situations that were for me when people just didn’t care for their dog.”</i>
<i>P7</i>	<i>“No, not any really stressful situation. There was one lady who said that she didn’t have food for her dog.”</i>

The social workers identified various coping strategies, such as using a pet as motivation, going home to family and friends, and being grateful as ways to cope with the stress of their work. Social workers with less than 5 years of experience admitted to struggling with the demands of the job. Participant 3, who had 4 years of experience, said:

When I started working as a social worker, I went into depression because I didn’t know how to control my emotions. I slowly went into depression because I feel for humans so much. I was still young. I didn’t know how to manage my own emotions.

P6, who has 3 years of experience, stated:

There were times when I would try to communicate with others that there's only so much that I can do for you, you know? There's going to be situations where I

want to give you the resources that are available to you, but you're going to have to put in effort to connect with the people. And sometimes people, they don't want to, they don't want to understand that. There were a couple of times where people try to say that I wasn't trying to help them or, I was playing favorites. In the beginning, when you first hear that like it's like, what, how can they be taking a shot at my integrity, you know, and I took it in the beginning, but somebody helped me to understand how people are going through things. And I can't take what they're saying as something that's about me. It's something about them. They're just going through stuff. And they're releasing, however they can. And so kind of change my perspective. I just couldn't believe, how can somebody say things about me but. I was young here, you know.

Participant 2, who had 4 years of experience, also stated that they had experienced burnout. "Definitely I feel burned out, I mean, it's easy to take trauma home with you. Secondhand trauma is a very real thing." P5, who had 18 years of experience as a social worker, said:

I watch people make terrible life decisions all the time. I mean, we talk about. But in therapy, people have to come to their own conclusions about that. They're not coming to me to just preach at them and say, well you should do this. That's not therapy. I've learned a long time ago that a trick of the trade that you have to just be able to kind of figure out a way to emotionally detach so that you can lay your head on the pillow at night and not have all these stories looming through your head.

Participant 4 who has 11 years of experience stated, “So I’ve learned working in this job that I can’t talk to people back-to-back because it’ll drain me.”

### **Vulnerability**

The participants described themselves as passionate with their love of helping others. Their love of helping others was the reason why they worked in the field, but they also acknowledged a level of danger or at times fear when working with victims and their pets. Participants also described emotionally heartbroken with some of the cases and stories they encountered while working with the victims (See table 7).

**Table 7**

#### *Vulnerability*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Participant responses</i>
<i>P1</i>	<i>“I remember the days in 2013 when we would turn people away because they have an animal. It was the hardest thing to witness.”</i>
<i>P2</i>	<i>“Sometimes the stories that they share, it was just heartbreaking to hear. The pain of that really carries over.”</i>
<i>P3</i>	<i>“I hate to see them suffering out there.”</i>
<i>P4</i>	<i>“We could get hurt regardless because of the abuser could find out where they are and come here and hurt us. We kind of run that risk.”</i>
<i>P5</i>	<i>“A shooting happened right in front of me.”</i>
<i>P6</i>	<i>“The situations that were the hardest when people didn’t care about their dog.”</i>
<i>P7</i>	<i>“I just take God everywhere I go.”</i>

P7 discussed their safety while working in the field:

So at all times, I keep my cell phone, not just my personal one, but my work phone. Anytime I'm out in the field and pick up any victims or anything to bring them to the safe house. I'm just being honest. I'm the type of person, I don't feel

much of anything. So why? I don't know. I've seen it all been through it all. I'm gonna be a woman of God. I'm gonna be prayer. So, I just take God everywhere I go.

P1 discussed how heartbreaking it was to have to turn victims away because of owning a pet. Participant 1 felt that it may have contributed to victims going back to their abusers or not leaving their relationship because of a pet. P1 said:

They would go away. We would give them. animal shelter resources. That the shelter can take the pet and then you come back. But we wouldn't see them come back whether or not they went to the animal shelter, the county animal shelter, we have no idea. And this happened a lot, so I would imagine we kind of ushered people back into the arms of abusers.

### **Barriers**

Participants were asked about how they managed to assist victims with little resources or when they were faced with barriers. Through analyzing the data categories of loopholes, rule-breaking, wish lists, needs/wants, and problems were found which led into themes of Resiliency and Barriers. An interesting find was that the participants wished that they had some sort of closure after working with the victims. They often wondered about the wellbeing of the pet and victim after leaving the shelter.

### **Resiliency**

Participants were passionate about their work in the field and often experienced barriers due to the shelter's policies, no space at the shelter, or even when victims found an apartment, their pet may or may not have been accepted. Categories that were found

within the data were loopholes and rule breaking as participants worked to accommodate and assist the victims (see Table 8).

**Table 8**

*Resiliency*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Participant Response</i>
<i>P1</i>	<i>“If they tell us it is going to be five hours, there is nothing I could do to expedite or speed up, but I’m making that second phone call to get the animal shelter to come and get your pet.”</i>
<i>P2</i>	<i>“I would say yes, but sometimes we have policies to protect more people which is understandable.:</i>
<i>P3</i>	<i>“It reminded me of my own puppy that I had and I couldn’t deny her to come.”</i>
<i>P4</i>	<i>“If they say the code word, this is my service/support animal, then we have to make accommodations.”</i>
<i>P5</i>	<i>“It was a cat, and we let it stay for the night, but the shelter had a no animal policy.”</i>
<i>P6</i>	<i>“They were able to keep them with their beds, which broke some rules.”</i>
<i>P7</i>	<i>“We would help them apply for the paperwork and once they got that paperwork, they were allowed to bring the dogs.”</i>

Participants would sometimes break rules just to keep pets and victims safe as well as assist the victim with obtaining the necessary documentation so that the shelter would have to accept the pet. Participants were creative in their ways in assisting the victims who own a pet. For example, P5 broke the rules to allow for a cat to stay at the shelter for one night. P5 said:

It was a cat and we let it stay for the night. But the shelter had a no animal policy. And so, I think they did her a solid by letting her keep it until a friend could come and make arrangements.

Participants went above and beyond for the safety of their clients and their pets because they understood the importance a pet was to their clients

### **Resources**

Participants identified additional resources and barriers when working with victims who owned a pet. Participants identified the need for more space and additional shelters to accommodate victims and pets because of the growing need (see Table 9).

**Table 9**

#### *Resources and Barriers*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Participant Response</i>
<i>P1</i>	<i>“Calling 311, it’s a long wait to get someone on the line. There needs to be a way to streamline everything.”</i>
<i>P2</i>	<i>“It would be helpful if we had some prepackaged pet food and treats.”</i>
<i>P3</i>	<i>“We need more space, more food, and mental health support for the victim.”</i>
<i>P4</i>	<i>“I think if more shelters did the coordination with animal shelters and work with them.”</i>
<i>P5</i>	<i>“We just need more shelters.”</i>
<i>P6</i>	<i>“I would add restrictions. There are certain situations where a person should not be allowed to have a pet.”</i>
<i>P7</i>	<i>“They need to renovate all those old buildings they have here downtown and make them into shelters because the homeless population is so prevalent.”</i>

P2 discussed wanting more resources and trying to work with minimal resources. P2 said:

I do think it would be really helpful if we had like some prepackaged pet food and some treats. You know when you go to a regular shelter, they give you treats to give out to a dog or to help you bond with a new animal when you're trying to adopt. I think that would really help because in a lot of these situations, everyone's afraid. And so, it doesn't help anybody if your animal is more stressed

out than you. And more training on how to approach, and how to help with minimal resources, kind of like how we do crisis first aid but with someone with a pet, I think there could definitely be some more training in that aspect because I do think it's important.

P5 discussed needing more awareness and attention to domestic violence because the public may not be aware of any resources for victims and their pets. P5 said:

How can we get more publicity around this issue I because I feel like it's Petco, or PetSmart. I can't remember which one of them, but one of them sponsored the Purple Leash Project. You know, everyone's aware of domestic violence issues, but I think but also at the same time, it is designed to stay private. They don't publicize where the shelters are for people's safety. I think bringing more attention to that to the common public that this is really a problem.

After the interview participants were asked if there were any questions that were not asked but should have been asked. Participants did not particularly have new questions but stated that they wished that they knew what happened to the victim when they moved on. They wished for some sort of closure. This need seems to align strongly with their identity as a social worker because of their want to help others and see the people succeed.

### **Summary**

Results of this study were presented as themes for each research question. RQ1 involved lived experiences of social workers who responded and assisted victims of domestic violence who owned pets. Participants expressed strong identities connected to

being social workers and passion about their love for helping others. They had a love for pets and agreed pets were part of their families. They identified feeling vulnerable when working with victims due to witnessing and hearing stories about victims' abuse. This led to participants learning how to cope with the job stressors and trauma they felt when assisting victims. RQ2 involved identifying any barriers or resources social workers needed to assist victims of domestic violence who owned pets. Participants found alternatives to assist victims, which sometimes led them to breaking rules. They also identified the need for more resources to assist victims who owned pets. Chapter 5 includes findings, limitations and recommendations for the study, and implications for positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore lived experiences of social workers who responded to and assisted victims of domestic violence who owned pets. Victims of domestic violence often flee abusive relationships with the bare minimum of belongings. If they own pets, they bring their pets to domestic violence shelters, but some of these shelters are unable to accommodate pets and have to turn victims away. Social workers struggle to assist victims due to lacking resources and sometimes no-pet policies at shelters. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to understand this research problem. Semi-structured interviews with seven participants led to rich data. Six primary themes emerged from data: social worker identity, stress and trauma, vulnerability, pets as family, resiliency, and resources.

### **Interpretation of the findings**

Social workers work every day to assist victims of domestic violence. They try to better the lives of people they help. Helping others is a significant aspect of being a social worker. They at times put themselves in dangerous situations. I explored lived experiences of social workers who responded to and assisted victims of domestic violence who owned pets. As a result of this study, thick detailed data regarding these experiences led to valuable insights. Six primary themes were found from data: social worker identity, stress and trauma, vulnerability, pets as family, resiliency, resources, and barriers.

### **Identity of a Social Worker**

Identity is a strong aspect of being a social worker. Participants identified themselves as having a love for helping others and having empathy. Identity motivated them to go to work every day and face challenges. Participants identified it was not about money, and some even took pay cuts to work in the field. For participants, work was about helping and bettering wellbeing of others.

Participants' motivation to help others pushed them to think creatively when they encountered difficulties. These challenges helped participants to always learn on the job.

### **Pets as Family**

All participants had pets of their own and understood pets were family. This was also important for victims they helped. Participants recognized victim bonds with pets and understood struggles victims experienced due to owning pet.s They could draw upon their own experiences involving owning pest when working with this population.

This study confirmed findings in the literature review. For example, participants noticed victims formed strong bonds with their pets. They recognized pets were part of families and victims of violence as well. They also recognized the need to help victims with their pets. This strong bond victims form with their pets is important to recognize because they rely on their pets for comfort.

Some participants addressed past instances where, due to policies, they had to turn victims away. Participants expressed remorse and regret, stating they most likely sent victims back to their abusers. This possibility not only hurts social workers because they are unable to assist victims, but also victims who return to their abusers and experience

more violence that could be lethal (Barret et al., 2022). Not being able to assist victims who own pets puts victims at an increased risk for lethal violence and emotionally affects social workers who try to help.

### **Stress and Trauma**

Participants expressed they had not experienced any stress or trauma when assisting victims who owned pets. This was explored further to understand why participants denied stress and trauma when, at times, they were working with little to no resources. Participants who had 5 or more years of experience were able to separate themselves from stress and trauma of work. Participants who worked for less than 5 years appeared to initially struggle with their feelings until they learned to separate themselves emotionally from their work as they gained more knowledge and experience. Participants understood that as much as they wanted the best for their clients, their clients were free to make their own decisions. Participants stated they felt they must accept their clients' choices. Experience working in the field plays an important role in terms of participants' ability to cope with job stressors and trauma.

I used Hobfoll's theory of conservation of resources as a lens to understand experiences of social workers. Hobfoll (1989) theorized resources can be symbolic or physical. As people go through life, they can gain or lose resources. Social workers who do not have resources experience more stress and trauma than those who have resources. Depending upon amount of resources a person has at any given time, they may or may not be able to cope with stressors or traumatic events. This appeared true for participants as they gained more experience in the field. Participants who worked less than 5 years

appeared to struggle more with stressors and trauma compared to those who had worked for more than 5 years. They expressed lack of resources was an issue when trying to assist victims who owned pets. Long wait times when calling assistance lines, archaic systems, and waiting hours for pets to be accepted to shelters were difficult to manage while trying to keep safe.

### **Resiliency**

These barriers, although stressful, did not deter participants from thinking creatively to find solutions for these clients. Participants mentioned they would continue to hold on the phone and diligently continue to call resources to assist victims and their pet. Participants were willing to take as long as needed to ensure victim and pet safety.

The theme of resiliency was determined from data. Participants sometimes overcame barriers they experienced due to creative thinking and being resourceful. Some participants mentioned they would at times break rules of shelters to keep victims and their pets safe. While this may have gone against shelter policies, participants did what they felt was right in the moment because alternatives for victims could be worse. Since participants identified strongly as social workers, they were occasionally vulnerable to the dangers of work. Participants were aware abusers could find and hurt them at their place of work due to the nature of the job. Still, because of their strong identity, they always seemed to be willing to assist victims no matter the circumstances.

### **Vulnerability**

The theme vulnerability was found in data. It was closely linked with identity of social workers because participants put themselves in various situations that could be

dangerous, such as picking up victims from dangerous neighborhoods. Participants knew how to keep themselves safe by keeping cell phones on them, but their need to help others put them in vulnerable situations.

### **Resources and Barriers**

Another major theme that was found from the data was resources and barriers. A category within that theme was a wish list. Participants would often make the best of the situation for every victim. Participants wanted more resources to assist victims who owned a pet, such as, food, treats, carriers, reflective gear, more 24-hour animal services, and more shelters that would accept pets. Having more resources would allow social workers to assist victims that can allow them to leave their abusive relationships safely and never return. Unfortunately, the supply of these resources does not meet the demand. The participants expressed that animal shelters are often full and unable to accommodate new intakes. With new resources being allocated to domestic violence shelters, it will give social workers more ease in helping victims who own a pet.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study explored the experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own a pet and seek services at a domestic violence shelter. Social workers are not the only people involved with those who experience violence. When a victim goes to the shelter, they may interact with receptionists, doctors, nurses, and other staff members who work at the shelter who are not in a social worker role. These employees have interactions with the victims and may potentially have experiences of stress and trauma. This study did not explore the experiences of other staff

who were not working in the role of a social worker. Generalizability is also a limitation because of the small number of participants in this study. There are many more social workers who work with victims of domestic violence victims in other contexts, such as hospitals, community centers, doctor's offices, and homeless shelters.

Another limitation of this study was that participants who participated were located throughout the United States. Participants had similar and different experiences based on their location and the resources their state allocates to domestic violence shelters. Again, generalizability is problematic with this study.

### **Recommendations**

This study explored the experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims of domestic violence who own a pet. Understanding these experiences will help guide policymakers in allocating more resources to assist social workers in helping victims who own a pet. Gaining more resources will help reduce stressors and trauma social workers experience while assisting these victims who own a pet.

Further research could explore other healthcare settings and how healthcare providers are impacted by people who own pets. For example, a primary care doctor may order a patient to go to the hospital due to the severity of their illness, however, the patient may decline due to not having any care for their pet at home. People who decline healthcare or housing options due to a pet can experience struggle and frustration amongst providers who do not understand the pet's significance for the owner or the lack of options when a pet is involved. Providing more education to providers who work with different populations on the importance of the human/animal bond people share with their

pets will help guide providers to include pets in the treatment plan and decision-making process. Including pets or being mindful about pets while working with clients can help to reduce stressors or trauma clients experience when making decisions about their treatment.

Furthermore, research can also explore how the identity of a social worker plays an important role for people who work in these roles and how they assist the people that they serve every day. Social workers go above and beyond to assist the clients they serve. Because of this strong identity, social workers often take positions that are low-paying or can place them, at times, in dangerous situations. This strong identity can make social workers vulnerable to being exploited by companies, as P4 said:

I think because she didn't make it such a big deal. They're like, oh, you know, especially like the place we were at, it was like a nonprofit. And so it's like we got all these grants. We have these numbers we have to make. We have certain quotas we have to meet. And so they're worried about the numbers and the money. And the little stuff, like the paperwork for intake, it's at the bottom. I think it just wasn't at the top priority.

While social workers are aware of work/life balance, they are still motivated to help the people they serve because of their strong connection to the identity of a social worker.

Pet ownership is common and by exploring how social workers experience barriers when a client who owns multiple pets or pets with disabilities seeks services. For example, a person may delay leaving an abusive relationship because they own multiple cats. Finding housing may be difficult due to pet restrictions such as not allowing pets or

allowing one pet only. Loopholes can be found, such as having a pet certified as a support animal, but this only centers around one pet and not multiple. Victims may experience stress and trauma if they are forced to surrender multiple pets. Another aspect to consider would be pets who have medical conditions, such as seizures, and might require medical care and medication to manage their condition. With increased medical complexities, it may be difficult for pet owners to access the services they need and for providers to assist these individuals. Emergency medication and other supplies may be needed at shelters to assist a victim who flees with their pet but does not remember to take the pet's medication.

Social workers, healthcare providers, and all who work in human services should routinely ask about pets and the safety of those pets. By doing so, these workers will foster a positive, trusting relationship with their clients. Clients will be more inclined to work with the provider rather than putting their pets' needs first and declining care. More education and awareness should be centered around the human/animal bond and the ownership of pets. Posters and brochures can be used to help inform clients of services available for pets, as well as serve as a reminder to providers to discuss and create treatment plans that involve a pet.

## **Implications**

### **Positive Social Change**

This study creates positive social change by providing more awareness around the bond people share with their pets and that more resources, policies, and financial support should be allocated to provide for those who own a pet and those who are serving those

who own a pet. Organizations that work in human services will be able to assist people who own pets and allow them access to the critical care they need. Victims of domestic violence will be able to leave their abusive relationship safely without worry or fear for their pet, thus keeping families together. People will be able to access other healthcare facilities and will not have to delay treatment without fear of having to leave their pet for extended periods of time.

Creating more awareness around pets will also allow for other organizations, such as animal shelters, family fosters, and emergency veterinarian care, to network with other local organizations to create more resources and assist those who own a pet with more ease. Additional networking can help to reduce long wait times.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study used Hobfoll's (1989) Theory of Conservation of Resources as a theoretical framework for understanding the lived experiences of social workers who respond to and assist victims who own a pet. This theory offered a lens that showed that having resources, symbolic or physical, allowed individuals to cope better with stressors and trauma than those who did not have appropriate or an abundance of resources. All the participants currently work or have worked at a domestic violence shelter, and all have had different resources, experience, and knowledge about their field. The amount of resources that they had available to them contributed to the amount of stress and trauma they experienced. Experience in the field of social work did have a significant impact on the wellbeing of the participants. As participants gained more experience in the field of

social work, their stressors and trauma were reduced as they learned ways to have a positive work/life balance and cope with the job stressors.

### **Conclusion**

Domestic violence is a public health crisis. With more and more people choosing to own a pet, finding a way to leave an abusive relationship safely becomes problematic. People form a bond with their pet, and the pet is often referred to as a ‘family member.’ This study explored the lived experiences of social workers who respond to and assist domestic violence victims who own a pet. Social workers have a strong need and are motivated to assist victims, but they struggle to assist because of a pet. Although they can find ways to assist these victims, it is devastating to know that people have been turned away from a shelter or they have remained in an abusive relationship because of a pet. It is also devastating that pets are used as a position of power to keep victims within an abusive relationship.

Domestic violence can be lethal, and by understanding the experiences of social workers who assist these victims, more resources and network connections can be made to help victims of domestic violence leave their relationship safely and not worry about the safety or wellbeing of their pets. Sometimes, there is a need to think creatively, just as in 1874 when social worker Etta Wheeler sought help from the founder of the ASPCA to help a child who suffered from abuse and neglect. It may be time for animal shelters, veterinarians, pet fosters, and other services to come together with social workers to advance the field again to save more lives. By understanding the barriers social workers

experience and adding more resources to reduce those barriers, more lives, both humans and animals, can be saved.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. Do you own a pet?
  - Can you tell me about your pet?
  - Did you own pets while growing up?
  - What is your relationship with your pet?
  - What are your experiences that made you decide against owning a pet?
  - If you don't own a pet, what are your thoughts about not owning a pet?
2. Can you tell me how long you have been working as a social worker?
  - What do you like about working as a social worker?
  - In what ways can the work be stressful/rewarding?
3. Can you tell me about your experience with a client who came to the shelter with their pet seeking services?
  - Can you give me another example?
4. Have you felt there is an increasing need for assistance for victims who own pets?
  - In your experience how often do you see people arriving at a shelter who own a pet?
5. What is your experience working with clients who own a pet?
6. What is your experience when responding to the client who owns a pet?
  - What have you noticed about how the client feels about their pet?
7. Can you tell me about any traumatic or stressful experiences with clients who own a pet and were seeking services?
8. Can you tell me about any experiences when the client was putting their pet's needs above their own?
  - In your opinion, what resources or an increase in resources are needed to assist victims who own a pet?
9. If there was anything that you could change about helping clients with their pets, what would it be?
10. Is there anything that I did not ask but should have asked?