

REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE

sample standard operating procedure



The veterinarian's legal responsibility to report suspicion of animal cruelty and neglect varies by state. While one may not be legally mandated to report abuse, the veterinarian's ethical and moral responsibility is different. Based on the following, the OVMA encourages the reporting of suspected animal abuse.

POSITIONS ON REPORTING

American Veterinary Medical Association

"The AVMA recognizes that veterinarians may observe cases of animal abuse or neglect as defined by federal or state laws, or local ordinances. The AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report such cases to appropriate authorities, whether or not reporting is mandated by law. Prompt disclosure of abuse is necessary to protect the health and welfare of animals and people. Veterinarians should be aware that accurate, timely record keeping and documentation of these cases are essential. The AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to educate clients regarding humane care and treatment of animals."

Source: <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/avma-policies/animal-abuse-and-animal-neglect> (retrieved April 2020)

American Animal Hospital Association

AAHA "supports reporting of suspicions of animal abuse to the appropriate authorities."

Source: <https://www.aaha.org/about-aaha/aaha-position-statements/animal-abuse-reporting/> (retrieved April 2020)

“Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge. —The Veterinarian's Oath



HOW TO RECOGNIZE

Every situation is different, and it may not always be possible to differentiate accidental injury from intentional injury or to determine whether neglect is severe enough to constitute cruelty. The veterinarian does not need proof of abuse; reporting should occur whenever there is a reasonable suspicion that abuse has occurred.

Possible findings that may suggest abuse, cruelty or neglect:

- Abandonment of animal
- Animal fighting
 - *Dogfighting*: Numerous bite wounds and/or bite wounds in various stages of healing and/or overlapping scars typically localized to head, neck, and front legs
 - *Cockfighting*: Feathers trimmed or removed; head injuries consistent with slashing or puncture; combs, wattles, and ear lobes removed; natural spur removed, cut down, or sharpened.
- Animal hoarding
- Embedded collar
- Extreme emaciation with no clear medical reason
- Injuries and/or conditions (eg., wounds, lesions, fractures, burns, or patches of missing hair) without a reasonable explanation.
- Grooming, inadequate (*extreme matting of fur, overgrown nails, and/or dirty coat*)
- Multiple injuries in various stages of healing
- Physical abuse of/harm to an animal
 - This could be witnessed by staff, or
 - A client reports he/she caused harm.
- Severe parasite infestation (*flea, tick, maggots*)
- Sexual abuse of an animal
- Suffering caused by ongoing injury or illness that isn't being treated
- Unexplained injury(ies) that don't match history provided by owner.
- Unsuitable housing (e.g., *dogs repeatedly left alone without food and water, chained in a yard without proper shelter, frostbite, heat stroke, etc.*)

PROPER DOCUMENTATION

- Using an abuse reporting form will ensure you capture all relevant information. Your humane agency may have one for you to use, or you can customize your own.

» Download Sample Abuse Reporting Forms online at www.ohiovma.org/abuse.
- The reporting form should be kept as part of the medical record.
- Be aware that your documentation may become part of a legal record.
- Write concise, factual information (what you see and observe).
- Always have a second witness present during discussion with the owner (client) and document the witness' name.
- Document suspicions clearly and provide any evidence you have to support your assessment.
- Give dates and approximate times when possible.
- Include owner's explanation of how the injury or condition occurred and any comments about the situation. Note whether this matches the animal's presentation and/or whether there were conflicting versions of the history presented.
- Document observations of interactions between family members and children.
- Summarize a thorough physical exam, even if findings do not seem to relate to the problem of concern.
- Take photographs if possible/when applicable.
- Include x-rays, previous records, and lab work.



REPORTING ABUSE

Situations where reporting is warranted after consideration

Client refuses to euthanize and/or leaves against medical advice (AMA).

- Refusal to euthanize alone is not grounds for a report of medical neglect. Many owners choose not to euthanize for a variety of reasons (cultural, moral, religious).
- If an owner does not wish to euthanize, they need to provide a level of care that ensures the animal is not experiencing pain or suffering.
- However, refusal or inability to provide appropriate management of pain and/or suffering may be a reason to report medical neglect.
- **BOTTOM LINE: A call to the humane agency is encouraged in cases where suffering is not alleviated.**

Owner admits that they caused harm to the animal, but is seeking medical services.

- It is common opinion that a report is not required because the owner has taken responsibility and brought their animal in for treatment.
- However, admitting that one caused harm and seeking medical care after the harm has occurred DOES NOT NEGATE the abuse or neglect.
- Injuries, especially blunt trauma, may be indicative of a larger abuse problem (i.e., domestic violence) occurring in the household.
- **BOTTOM LINE: If a person purposely causes harm, a report to the humane agency is warranted.**

Client is uneducated about proper animal care.

- A lack of education regarding proper animal care commonly underlies many cases of neglect.
- In such instances, it is appropriate to educate the client about their animal's physical and emotional needs.
- Clearly document the discussion and your recommendations in the patient record.
- **BOTTOM LINE: A report to the humane agency is warranted when:**
 - The owner claims he/she "just didn't know any better."
 - The owner returns to the clinic and has disregarded your recommendations.
 - The owner does not return. In this case, you are permitted to call the humane agency and request a "well check" to the client's residence.

Cultural differences.

- There may be cultural differences that a client may use to explain or excuse choices made regarding the animal.
- While it is important to be aware of and respect other cultures, the priority is the health and safety of an animal.
- **BOTTOM LINE: If you suspect abuse, a report to the humane agency is warranted.**

Process for Reporting Suspicion of Abuse, Cruelty, and/or Neglect

- Using an animal abuse reporting form will help you capture all the relevant information.
 - » *Download Sample Abuse Reporting Forms online at www.ohiovma.org/abuse.*
- If you do not use a form, have the following information available when you make the report:
 - The exact address of the owner's residence.
 - The exact address where the abuse/neglect occurred.
 - The exact location where the animal is located now.
 - If able, provide law enforcement with the names and contact information of other people who have firsthand information about the abusive situation.
- Contact the humane society or humane agent in the county where the abuse occurred.
- In your documentation, record/include the following:
 - The agency and/or name of individual you contact
 - Date(s) of the contact
 - Copies of documents you provide to law enforcement or animal control
 - The content and outcome of your discussion.
- A humane agent may ask for records. Legally, you should not release these without permission from the owner or a subpoena or court order.
 - However, records may be shared without permission if the information has potential human health implications (e.g., child abuse, animal bites).
- The practice owner, manager, and/or hospital director should be notified when a report is made.

REMEMBER: A reasonable suspicion of abuse or neglect is enough to make a report. *You may always call the appropriate humane agency for consultation, if you are unsure whether a report is warranted.*

Additional Procedures / Notes:

This image shows a blank sheet of primary-ruled paper. It features ten sets of horizontal lines across its width. Each set is composed of three lines: a solid top line, a dashed middle line, and a solid bottom line, providing a guide for letter height and placement. The background is white, and the lines are black.