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**Delaware Family Court judge hosts a legal education program looking at the connection between animal abuse and domestic violence cases**

More than 120 people participated in a daylong legal education program on April 21, 2022 focusing on the overlap between animal welfare/animal abuse cases and domestic violence/child abuse cases. The program, held at the Wilmington offices of the Delaware State Bar Association, brought together attorneys and non-attorneys in the domestic violence, animal welfare, and child welfare sectors to learn how these cross-sector professionals can intervene in the former to prevent the latter.

“As a Family Court Judge, I believe having more information about the risks present in a family unit leads to better decisions. Knowing about the links between animal abuse and other forms of abuse and about the important role pets play in the families we serve can help each of us and our respective organizations identify earlier interventions to avoid harm and achieve better outcomes for families.” said Delaware Family Court Judge Jennifer B. Ranji, who hosted and organized the event.

It featured more than 20 speakers and panelists discussing such matters as the proper responses to animal cruelty, use of animal abuse as a form of domestic violence, and possible legislation to address the link between animal cruelty and violence in the home.

“Judges and prosecuting attorneys are playing an increasingly important role in preventing abuse of women, children and vulnerable adults by focusing more attention on animal cruelty as a warning sign of other family and community violence,” said speaker Phil Arkow, Coordinator of the National LINK Coalition, an advocacy group that focuses on the connection between animal abuse and violence among people. “We are actively training attorneys and judges nationwide to learn about the co-occurrence of animal cruelty and family violence in the cases that come before them and to understand their opportunity to address harm and promote safety for all members of the family. We are extremely pleased to bring this training to Delaware in hopes that lawmakers and the courts will ‘connect the dots’ and recognize that when animals are abused people are at risk, and when people are abused animals are at risk.”

Other speakers and panelists included officials from the Animal Welfare Institute, the Brandywine Valley SPCA, Friendship House, the Delaware Department of Justice, the Delaware Office of Defense Services, the Delaware Office of Animal Welfare, the Divisions of Family Services and Youth Rehabilitative Services, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and several Delaware legislators.

“I am deeply grateful for the work and collaboration of all of the organizations who participated in the seminar – from the Division of Family Services to the Department of Justice, to the Office of Animal Welfare, to our shelter partners and national counterparts – and for their willingness to continue the dialogue regarding what we have learned today,” Delaware Family Court Judge Jennifer B. Ranji continued. “We already know that animal abuse is horrifying. What we also now know is that animal abuse can be more than abuse of an animal: It can be a tool for perpetrators of domestic violence to exert control over their human victims and it is a risk factor for child abuse in the household. By continuing the cross-sector communication started at the seminar, we can create systems that lead to better interventions by our service-providers, more informed decisions from the court, and most importantly, better outcomes for the families we serve.”