

# MISSION ACCOMPLISHED AND MISSION BEGUN: TRAINING JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES TO BE DECISION MAKERS, EDUCATORS, AND AMBASSADORS ON THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND AND THE LINK BETWEEN ANIMAL CRUELTY AND INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE



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The human-animal bond is a powerful and enduring connection that has existed for millennia. It encompasses the emotional, psychological, and physical relationships between humans and animals. From the beloved pets that share our homes to the service animals that aid those in need, this bond enriches our lives in numerous ways. With the changing structure and composition of the family in the United States, pets and companion animals have an increasingly larger presence and importance in the lives of the majority of families. Animal welfare is inextricably tied to human welfare. The dynamics and behaviors that harm human family members also harm animal family members and vice versa. We know that it is crucial for juvenile and family court judges to understand the dynamics of domestic

violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and juvenile offending in order to render decisions that promote the safety and wellbeing of family members in cases involving these behaviors. It is just as crucial for judges to understand how pets and companion animals are affected by interpersonal violence, are themselves victims, and need to be included in judicial decision-making to prevent and address family violence. Equipping judges handling family law cases with knowledge of the bond and the link, in order to make decisions that promote the safety and wellbeing of all members of the modern American family, has been a goal guiding the partnership between the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and the Animal Legal Defense Fund (ALDF) since the partnership began in 2019.

The NCJFCJ, with support from the ALDF, has developed numerous resources for juvenile and family court judges on the human and animal bond and the link between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence.

#### RESOURCES:

[NCJFCJ: Animal Cruelty and Family & Interpersonal Violence](#)

[NCJFCJ Publication: Judge-to-Judge Letter Regarding Animal Cruelty and Interpersonal Violence](#)

[NCJFCJ: The NCJFCJ Releases Resolution Regarding Animal Cruelty and Its Link to Violence](#)

[NCJFCJ: Animal Cruelty Issues: What Juvenile and Family Court Judges Need to Know](#)

Most recently, the NCJFCJ developed and facilitated the inaugural, 1.5-day, in-person judicial training on the bond and the link, which was delivered by NCJFCJ staff, judicial faculty, and ALDF attorneys, October 2-3, 2023 in Washington, DC. Hosted by the George Washington University Law School (GWULS), the Judicial Institute on the Human-Animal Bond and the Link between Animal Cruelty and Interpersonal Violence: Issues in Family Law Cases, culminated efforts

began in 2019 to develop curriculum for an extensive, in-person judicial training to provide judges with hands-on, case-specific understanding and application of the information and recommended practices set forth in the seminal publication, *Animal Cruelty Issues: What Juvenile and Family Court Judges Need to Know*. Institute faculty included NCJFCJ Senior Site Manager Dr. Martha Blomquist, former NCJFCJ president Judge John Romero (ret), current NCJFCJ Board of Director Judge H. Lee Chitwood, and Judge Rosa Figarola (ret). They were joined by ALDF staff attorney Kathleen Wood and ALDF contract attorney Betsy Biffi.

Thirteen judges from the states of Delaware, Indiana, Ohio, Virginia, Texas, and Wisconsin attended the Institute. They represented a range of experience on the bench (from 3 months to 23 years), a range of docket types handled (DV protection orders, child abuse, elder abuse, and juvenile offending), and a range of knowledge of the animal human bond and the link between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence, from little familiarity to considerable knowledge. But their goals in attending the Institute were very similar: to learn new information on the human-animal bond and how it affects interpersonal violence and the behaviors of domestic violence (DV) perpetrators as well as DV survivors. Participating judges sought guidance on strategies to identify and respond to abuse when human-



*Photo from the reception at the George Washington University Law School (GWULS) Animal Law Program hosted at the end of the first day of the Institute for Institute faculty and participants*

animal relationships are involved, including an enhanced understanding of companion animal welfare when making decisions in elder or guardian cases. Attendees also came to the Institute with the goal of acquiring practical strategies and resources for handling the range of family law cases that come before them -divorce, child custody, protection orders, elder abuse, child abuse – where pet welfare and human welfare are both at issue.

**“THANK YOU FOR HOSTING US AT THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND AND THE LINK BETWEEN ANIMAL CRUELTY AND INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE INSTITUTE. YOUR TEAM OPENED OUR EYES TO THE RESOURCES THAT WE CURRENTLY HAVE AND WHAT WE STILL NEED TO ADEQUATELY ADDRESS THIS ISSUE IN OUR COMMUNITY.”**  
**-INSTITUTE PARTICIPANT FROM OHIO**

Through sharing facts and research findings on the bond and the link, walking attendees through specific case types and facts, engaging participants in discussions of their experiences with similar cases, and offering guidance on recommended practice for each type of family law case, Institute faculty provided the actionable knowledge that attendees were seeking. Faculty also addressed the important role that judges play in leading their respective communities, and promoting awareness of the link between animal cruelty.

The final activities of the Institute engaged participants in preparing to return to their courts and communities with individual action plans. Institute materials included various resources to support them in being informed decisionmakers, ambassadors, and educators on the issues of the bond and the link. The Institute workbook contained recommended practices for different types of family law cases, a sample benchcard with facts on the link between animal cruelty and DV, child abuse, and elder abuse as well as recommended judicial practice, sample protection orders, and a sample agenda for a bench and bar training on the link. Participants also received hard copies of the publication, *Animal Cruelty Issues: What Juvenile and Family Court Judges Need to Know*, as well as annotated sets of their state's statutes related to animal cruelty. Faculty report-outs of highlights from participant action planning and strategic planning discussions wrapped up the Institute with a sense that the Institute's mission was both accomplished and just begun - the mission of providing attendees with practical and useful knowledge was accomplished and the mission of creating and sending forth new judicial ambassadors and educators on the issues had just begun.

**“WE REALLY COULD NOT HAVE IMAGINED THE JUDICIAL INSTITUTE GOING ANY BETTER—SUCH GREAT ENERGY FROM THE PRESENTERS AND PARTICIPANTS, AND A PERFECT VENUE.” ALDF CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROGRAM DIRECTOR LORA DUNN**



*Dr. Martha Blomquist, NCJFCJ Senior Site Manager and Institute Lead, Lora Dunn, ALDF Criminal Justice Program Director, and Dean Kathy Hessler, GWULS Animal Law Program*



*Judge John Romero (ret.), Judge H. Lee Chitwood, and Judge Rosa Figarola (ret.)*

Following the Institute, NCJFCJ team members have continued to provide participants with resources and supports to apply their Institute learning. After the Institute, some participants have already reached out for assistance with planning Bench and Bar CLE programs on the bond and the link for the practitioners in their jurisdiction. An Institute participant from Indiana recently shared that in protection order hearings, he has begun to ask Pro Se litigants if they have any pets. Through participants taking recommended steps like these, it is hoped that the inaugural Judicial Institute on the Human-Animal Bond and the Link between Animal Cruelty and Interpersonal Violence has equipped and inspired the first cohort of judges, in their work on and off the bench, to use the tools of education, awareness, reporting, and intervention to break the cycle of violence, create more responsive court processes for families and their pets, and build safer communities for all.

**“I BELIEVE THE TRAINING WENT QUITE WELL. PARTICIPANTS WERE ATTENTIVE AND ENGAGED, ESPECIALLY WITH THEIR ACTION PLANNING. I FEEL CONFIDENT THEY WILL ENHANCE LINK AWARENESS IN THEIR COURTS AND IN THE STAKEHOLDER COMMUNITY.” JUDICIAL INSTITUTE JUDGE JOHN ROMERO (RET.)**

For more information on training opportunities and resources relating to the human-animal bond and the link between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence, please contact Dr. Martha-Elin Blomquist at [mblomquist@ncjfcj.org](mailto:mblomquist@ncjfcj.org)



*A pet collage put together from pet photos the Institute faculty and participants submitted prior to the Institute to create the cover page for the Institute Workbook that attendees received.*