Public Housing
The Green Party pushes a referendum to create a county authority in Arlington.

Director to Exit
Sam Sweet, who has been with Signature Theatre for six years, is set to step down.

Live!
The National Chamber Ensemble makes its debut Saturday at Rosslyn Spectrum Theatre.

A Play of Myths
In St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School's "Metamorphoses," an old epic comes to life.

Women's Shelter
Making Room for Dogs

Recognizing that some victims stay in violent homes for the welfare of their pets, the Doorways shelter in Arlington will provide on-site boarding for the animals.

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Sheltering Women—And Their Pets, Too

Experience With Victims Who Stayed in Violent Homes for the Sake of Their Dog or Cat Led a Humane Association Official to Help Make Room for Animals at Arlington Shelter

By Brigid Schulte ■ Washington Post Staff Writer

A llie Phillips was prosecuting a domestic violence case in Michigan in the late 1990s. She was ready to go to trial when the victim came to her and said, “I can’t do this. He’s already killed my dog. I still have two other dogs and a goat. I’ve got to go back and protect them.” The victim didn’t testify. Phillips lost the case. And to this day, she doesn’t know what became of the abused woman or her beloved animals.

“That was my first awareness that people will go back into abusive situations because of their pets,” she said.

So when Phillips became director of public policy at the American Humane Association, which works to protect children and animals from cruelty, abuse and neglect, she decided to tackle the issue head on. “I thought, what if we get the animals out, too?” she said. “Then [the victims] won’t be forced to show up in court and recant. If we can get everyone out, why would they ever go back? That could end the cycle of violence.”

Phillips came up with the Pets and Women Shelter, or PAWS, a national education campaign to raise awareness about the issue and to encourage shelters to do something about it. Her first project is with the Doorways for Women and Families Safehouse in Arlington. PAWS awarded Doorways a $5,000 grant to turn an old shed in the back yard into a kennel and animal shelter.

“By housing the animals on site with the women and children, it maintains the human-animal bond,” Phillips said. “When they’ve lost everything, their home, and all they have is the clothing on their back, feeding the dog, going for walks gives them a sense of normalcy. What better way to get comfort?”

Doorways, like many shelters across the country, helps women with pets by housing the animals in temporary kennels or foster care. “But the women and children can’t visit for safety reasons,” Phillips said. “That adds to the trauma.”

Marielle Filholm, director of Doorways’ domestic violence program and the safe house, said she has become increasingly troubled by the number of battered women who are reluctant to leave their pets behind, even though their lives may be in danger.

She said she has known women who have failed to leave or delayed leaving abusive relationships because they worry about what will happen to their pets. “She said she has known women who do leave but then return, thereby endangering themselves, just so they can check on a beloved cat, rabbit or horse. She talks of women who have returned because their abusers threatened to kill their pets if they didn’t come back. It took several months to convince one woman, who rescued abused animals, that she was better off leaving her abusive relationship. Social workers spent many more months planning where to move all the animals once she left the abuser.”

Doorways Executive Director Linda Dunphy said that because of the strong connection between animal abuse and domestic violence, the shelter has started asking women about pets as part of a regular safety assessment. When women who call the shelter hotline are asked what prevents them from leaving, many mention pets. “We’ve been successful partnering with the Arlington Animal Welfare League, but they can only take dogs for two weeks, and it’s not on site,” Dunphy said. “That can be traumatizing for the women, children and the pet.”

There’s concern about what will happen after two weeks. Now, having a pet on site will help the shelter heal for the woman and her children.

The shelter can keep up to three dogs without needing a special kennel permit, Dunphy said. The shelter houses 11 to 13 people at any one time. “We’re hoping that this becomes a way for women who ordinarily would not leave to have an option,” she said.

Under the new program, pets will be housed outside and not allowed inside, because of allergies and out of respect for women who may not like animals. The pet owners will be responsible for their animals’ feeding and care. Initially, the shelter will accept only dogs. “But I have an idea of how we can serve all kinds of animals by converting our shed to house rabbits, turtles, whatever would bring,” Filholm said. “We want people to bring their dogs, fish, turtles or birds or whatever animal they’re attached to.”

Marcia Sanders runs what is probably the only other women’s shelter in the country that boards animals on site. “What we’ve got is not nearly as sophisticated or fancy as animal control,” Sanders said of the Naples, Fla., shelter. “It’s just a room with six large crates and two large areas where the animals can be outside. We’ve had dogs, cats, rabbits, gerbils, chinchillas. It’s just a really important part of our mission now, to allow women to bring pets.”

The shelter does not take large animals. “We had to say no to a woman who wanted to bring her horse,” Sanders said. And the facility doesn’t take reptiles for fear they could get loose. “There’s almost always at least one animal in there,” she said. “It doesn’t take much food. . . . don’t take many dollars. And just to have it there is worth it, for the one time that you might need it.”

Psychologists have long studied the link between animal abuse and domestic violence. But only a handful are beginning to study the way abusers use pets to control or terrify their victims.

And only in recent years have shelters and social workers begun to see the connection between women who won’t or can’t leave violent relationships and their attachment to a pet.

“I know people think, ‘This is just Fluffy and fluffy. What are you doing staying with an abuser?’” said Frank Asione, a psychology professor and researcher at Utah State University who is an expert on the link between animal abuse and domestic violence. “But think of Hurricane Katrina and all the images of the people who refused to leave unless some accommodations were made for the animals who were on the rooftops with them. Or with the recent California fires. There were people who refused to leave their pets or livestock even when they got stuck behind the fire line. You can see how strong that bond is for some people. Some people may choose to remain at risk if their animals can’t be cared for.”

Asione cited studies that have found that as many as 48 percent of women seeking shelter from domestic abuse have delayed leaving because of a pet. These studies also found that as many as 74 percent of the women who end up seeking shelter own pets. That, Asione said, is not hard to believe. In the United States, people own 61.6 million dogs, 68.9 million cats, 10.1 million birds and 5.1 million horses. And families with children, he said, are the highest pet-owning demographic.

People’s love for their animals has become a $40-billion-a-year industry, including pet salons, doggy day care, pet resorts, pet-sitting services and gourmet food. People put their pets on Christmas and holiday cards. Forty-seven states have made it a felony to commit acts of serious animal cruelty — killing, torturing or poisoning. “People talk about being their pet’s mom or dad,” the Humane Association’s Phillips said. “That wasn’t the case 10 or 15 years ago.”

Phillips is writing a manual to show shelters how to house victims and their pets. Her immediate goal is Arlington, and she is striving for 15 other shelters by the end of 2008.

“If you are in the business of trying to protect women and keeping them from going back into abusive homes, then you’ve got to get the pets out,” she said. “We have to get all the victims out of the home.”