



# Westpac Community Idol 2008

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Presentation by

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**Finalist, Westpac Community Idol 2008**

\*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the

**2008 Communities in Control Conference  
convened by Our Community and Centacare Catholic Family Services**

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[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)

Thank you. Firstly a round of applause to Desley and Ian – fantastic presentations and co-finalists. And thank you to all the supporters and people here.

Most people think the RSPCA's just about cats and dogs and obviously our core work is looking after cats and dogs. In the ACT it's about 8,500 cats, dogs, wombats, kangaroos, possums, birds, fish – you name it – that we look after and we provide care for each year.

But there's another part of our business that we do that we've been doing for a few years, and that's the hidden side of the work. Many people here today are involved in these areas – you work in domestic violence, you work in disability support, you work with alcohol, you work with drug rehabilitation, you work with children. And not many people would think that the RSPCA is involved in those types of services as well.

Well, today we're going to tell you a little bit about some of those services that we deliver under the auspice of what we call our Pet Support Program.

Who comes to the rescue when a series of these different scenarios happen? If we look at the first scenario, it's something not a lot of people like talking about – when domestic violence rears its ugly head.

65% of Australians own a pet of some type. Sadly, we have thousands and thousands of domestic violence incidents each year in this country. In those scenarios, 65% of those people also own a pet.

The very daunting and very scary statistic there is that more than half of the victims of domestic violence stay in the relationship for fear of what's going to happen to the pet. That's a very, very sad statistic, and something that concerned the RSPCA a number of years ago.

We looked at the research, we checked it, we ran it, we spoke to the experts and people and the reports came through that in most cases the female in the relationship said, "I'm not leaving this relationship. Something is going to happen to the cat. Something is going to happen to the dog. Refuges don't allow animals, so there is no escape there."

Part of my mandate at RSPCA is we don't want animals in animal shelters. The last place for an animal in this day and age is in an animal shelter. We're already overrun with an oversupply of abandoned and surrendered and stray

animals. To take more animals off people because their life circumstances preclude them from owning an animal is just not right.

So we put a program in place called Pet Support, which provides a temporary opportunity to send an animal to an RSPCA shelter, sort yourself out, move yourself out of that domestically violent situation, into a refuge, into a new living arrangement. When everything is sorted out we then re-introduce the animal back to that person who owns it, so they've had this short-term care.

The key thing there, or one of the satisfying things for us, is that 57% of people who stay in that relationship have an instant opportunity to get out of that relationship. So it's a fantastic tool that we're using, and using to great success. Of course, it's one of those things that we like to have available that we hope we don't have to use.

Another one of the areas that we work with is in mental health. I've sat down with politicians on both sides of the fence and chatted to them about people who have mental health problems and own an animal. And the scary thing is a couple of politicians have said to me, "They should just surrender the animal," which to me is sickening. Everybody, as we've been hearing all day today from Bill Shorten and Jenny Macklin, everybody has the right to live as an individual on their terms and on the basis that they want to live. If somebody has mental health problems there's no reason they shouldn't have an animal.

However, people may need to go in to get some assistance with mental health episodes. Again, the service and the system that we provide for those people is we say, "Leave your animal with us for a short period of time, we'll foster care it for you, get the mental health services that you need, attend the placement that you need so you can get yourself through this episode. When you're out and you've solved that problem we'll reunite you with your animal, guaranteed."

About a third of people with mental health problems refuse mental health placements because of the animal. And that's just another startling statistic – that people are so attached to their animal, and there's that fear that they're going to lose their animal if they leave it. But we give them that guarantee that the animal will come back to them.

The next one is essentially some of our core work. Who's going to intervene if a child thinks it's OK to kick the cat or injure a dog? There are a range of activities and programs that we have in place. In the ACT in the last 12

months we've become the first jurisdiction in this country to have had animal welfare committed to part of the core curriculum of primary school and high school students. It's the first time the Labor Government in the ACT has listened to an RSPCA and said, "Animal welfare is so important, we're going to put that onto your school curriculum." That's a fantastic outcome for us.

There are a range of other programs that we have. There's the Spot Program and there's Pet Peppers, there's a whole range of programs that address animal cruelty in the school system, but nothing tied to the curriculum that forces principals and teachers to focus on animal welfare and focus on the cruelty, and to create empathy around that.

An additional part of that program is our teaching of a love and compassion program that we're working on, which works on children with mental health problems, children with anger management problems, children with difficulties, who are in special classes or special schools that need that additional level of support. We work with those kids and assist them.

What we're hoping to do into the future, our focus is on early intervention – this is one of the key things. Obviously, education and working through that to work with the community is a big part of that, working with allied health services, talking to people in mental health groups, talking to people in domestic violence groups. You guys are the experts in delivering those services. Give us the animal – we're the experts with animals. And then families can get back together and we can reintroduce the animal.

I'll just use Julian as an example, if Julian can pop up on stage for me.

Julian has just come to the RSPCA and he's done the right thing and he's adopted a wonderful Dalmatian from the RSPCA.

Julian's adopted that dog and he lives in Canberra, a fantastic place of course. But over time people move away from Canberra and Julian's left on his own and he's getting a little bit older and he's starting to have some health problems.

He calls up the health system and he wants to go in and receive some health services. But he's worried about this little Dalmatian. Julian needs to get some health services but he's unwilling to part with that animal. His friends who are living in Sydney and his family who are living in Brisbane now are saying, "Just surrender it to the RSPCA." But Julian's refusing to do that because he wants to stay with this animal, and he's getting sicker and sicker

and sicker because he's so attached to this animal that he's adopted many years ago from RSPCA that he's refusing this health placement.

So he's adding additional costs to the health system, he's getting sicker and sicker and not receiving that service, so ultimately when he receives that service, there will be additional costs to the health system, additional costs to him and that's very concerning for the RSPCA.

So what we do is we say, "Hey Julian, give us the dog for a couple of weeks." So Julian surrenders the animal to the RSPCA for a short period of time – say, four weeks, six weeks care.

He's now gone off to hospital, received the services and the support that he's needed, and he's back healthy. He gives us a call and says, "Hey, can I have Linke the Dalmatian back." And we go, "Julian, fantastic, perfect health. The dog's had a great time with us for two weeks. It's going to have a greater time with you. So here's Linke the Dalmatian back."

There's another way of telling you a little bit about this. We've put a short three-minute presentation together.

Thank you very much for the nomination. Thank you for the support. Thank you to my other two finalists. It's been a fantastic experience for me.

We'll close my session now with a couple of minutes of some of the sights and sounds from RSPCA ACT.

**[Presentation runs]**