

Recognizing and Reporting Abuse and Neglect in the Horse World

By: Stacy Segal
Equine Protection Specialist
The Humane Society of the United States

Horses are large, complex creatures that require specialized knowledge and skill to properly care for them. As with other animals, lack of education and knowledge is the primary reason that horses are mistreated, abused and neglected. As members of the horse industry, we all have a responsibility to educate ourselves on proper horse care and the federal, state and local laws that pertain to horses.

While horse neglect and abuse are both considered animal cruelty, there is a difference between the two. Unintentional neglect involves failing to provide for the horse's basic needs: food, water, shelter, hoof care and veterinary care. Often neglect stems from a lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of the horse owner. Horse abuse can take many forms and includes maliciously torturing, maiming, mutilating or killing an animal. It's important to be able to identify if the problem is neglect or abuse, because different laws may or may not apply to each.

What can you do?

- 1) Educate yourself on the federal, state and local laws that pertain to horses. Legal protections for horses vary widely. Some states have minimum care laws pertaining to equines, others do not. In some states, horses are classified as domestic animals, in others, they are considered livestock and therefore exempt from animal cruelty statutes. Some good resources for information on horse related laws in your state are: your local agriculture extension office, state horse council, or state Department of Agriculture.
- 2) No breed or discipline is immune from abusive training practices or unscrupulous owners. While many of these practices are not covered by laws, some are. In 1970, Congress passed the Horse Protection Act to protect gaited horse breeds, like Tennessee Walking Horses, from a widespread practice know as soring. This involves applying chemicals and other irritants to the horse's legs and feet to force them lift their feet higher. Grooms, trainers, and riders who witness this abuse at shows can report it to the USDA, who is charged with enforcing the Horse Protection Act. While other inhumane training practices may not be able to be addressed through legal means, individuals can refuse to patronize the trainer, stable or rider who uses inhumane training methods, report the offense to whoever is in charge of the facility or the horse, and educate others about humane training practices.
- 3) In the event you witness equine neglect, if you feel comfortable doing so, approach the horse owner and offer to help. By talking with the horse owner, you may be able to determine the cause of the neglect (lack of education, financial difficulties) and then can help the owner come up with a solution to improve conditions for the horses. A horse

owner that is in over his head may be afraid to ask for help, but may welcome some information and advice from a concerned neighbor or horse owner.

If you do decide to report a suspected case of horse abuse or neglect to law enforcement, be aware that many law enforcement officials are unfamiliar with horses and their care. Offer yourself as a resource to law enforcement to help them understand proper horse care. Stay involved in your local horse community. The best way to hear about changes in equine laws and to network with other horse professionals is to join your local or state horse state council. If you research your state laws, and feel they don't provide strong enough protections for equines, consider lobbying for stronger laws.

Horse industry professionals are in a position to help horses on a day to day basis by educating others, reporting wrong doing when they see it, and upholding good standards and ethics. While it is sometimes difficult to do the right thing in the face of scrutiny or go against the norm, in the end, we must always think of what is in the best interest of the horse and allow that to guide our decision making.

Stacy Segal
Equine Protection Specialist
The Humane Society of the United States
P: 301-258-1408
E: ssegal@hsus.org

Interested in taking action online to help animals? Then join our online community! Go to <http://humanesociety.org/join>