

NO PETS LEFT BEHIND

More Domestic Violence Shelters Now Offer Housing Options for Companion Animals

By Stephanie Bouchard

For a whole host of reasons, leaving a domestic violence situation is not an easy thing to do. It shouldn't surprise anyone who loves their pet that concern for companion animals is one of those reasons.



Providing Safe Shelter for Survivors' Pets

Multiple studies and surveys have found that between 18% and 48% of women who have experienced domestic violence delay leaving a dangerous situation out of concern for their pets' safety and that 49% to 83% report their pets had been threatened, harmed, and/or killed by their partners, according to research compiled by the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), a Washington, DC-based nonprofit, and The Humane Society of the United States.* Fortunately, more sheltering options are being made available for the pets of domestic

violence survivors, including additional cohousing at domestic violence shelters.

Only within the past 2 decades has a greater understanding of the link between the abuse of humans and the abuse of animals prompted domestic violence programs to begin incorporating screening questions about pets when they talk with domestic violence survivors, says Dr. Mary Lou Randour, senior advisor of the AWI animal cruelty program.

And as more and more domestic violence programs began asking the questions, they've become more aware of the

importance of providing safe shelter for the pets of domestic violence survivors.

Supporting a Successful Outcome

A greater awareness is what prompted the Women's Center and Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania to open a pet suite at its shelter in 2019, says Allison Kacmar Richards, the shelter's director of administration.

In 2007, the shelter began screening for pet safety issues whenever they did assessments with domestic violence survivors, she says. As they began hearing more and more how much

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concern for their pets was part of survivors' reluctance or outright refusal to leave an abusive situation, the shelter began gathering and creating resources to get pets to safe shelter.

In 2010, they partnered with a local animal rescue program to house and foster pets so they could offer temporary sheltering options, and while they still maintain that partnership, Allison says that being able to offer cohousing has made a remarkable difference.

"Sometimes for someone who is extremely isolated in an abusive relationship, their pet may be their only support and sense of comfort," she says, "and particularly for children in a family where there's abuse going on, [the pet] may be their only and best friend."

Allison explains that, for example, it might feel like too big of a decision for a mother to tell her kids that they're not only going to leave part of their family, their house, and their school, but they're also leaving the children's best friend behind. "But when people find out they can bring their pets and spend time with their pets and snuggle with their pets...while also knowing that they're safe and cared for," she says, "it's really made a huge difference in the way we're able to talk about leaving the abusive relationship and the successful outcome once they're here as well."

Solving a Stressful Situation

Getting out of an abusive situation and into safe shelter is obviously a benefit to the humans, but it's also best for the animals, says Dr. Martha Smith-Blackmore, a veterinarian who operates Massachusetts-based Forensic Veterinary Investigations. She says that 10% to 15% of her cases are related to domestic violence.

"Violent households are not just physically violent. It's not just fists or hockey sticks. It's also a very constant and high level of

tension, verbal aggression, and postural aggression that creates a really tense environment," she explains. "So, animals who live in this negative stew can suffer all the same kind of stresses that people do due to chronic stress exposure."

That chronic stress exposure can contribute to immune and infectious diseases and may play a role in the development of cancer as well, Dr. Smith-Blackmore notes.

"It's an acute stress [for pets] to have to go from one living environment to another, [but] it's nothing like the chronic stress [pets are] having to withstand in an abusive household," she says. "It might be hard to change, but then life is so much better on the other side."

Getting Out and Getting Help

Making the change can be intimidating and challenging, the experts say; however, there are resources to help (see the sidebar at right).

Only about 10% of domestic violence shelters in the United States offer cohousing, says Dr. Randour, but other safe sheltering options include boarding at a veterinarian's office or animal boarding facility as well as temporary fostering situations with community members, animal rescue groups, or specialty breed organizations.

The AWI created and maintains the Safe Havens Mapping Project for Pets of Domestic Violence Victims to help domestic violence survivors nationwide find pet sheltering options. Dr. Randour says there are about 13,000 entries in the project so far. RedRover, a California-based nonprofit, runs Safe Place for Pets, a database of safe sheltering options across the United States and Canada. It also offers financial assistance to survivors to help them get shelter and care for their pets.

And, says Dr. Randour, with the Pet and Women Safety (PAWS) Act, which became law in 2018 and established a grant program to support sheltering services for domestic violence survivors and their companion animals, more funding should be available to further increase the sheltering and housing options available to survivors and their pets.

When not walking her cat on leash around their yard in Maine, freelance writer Stephanie Bouchard writes about pets and healthcare.

Resources for Domestic Violence Survivors

- **Animal Welfare Institute**—The AWI has many resources and educational materials online, including its Safe Havens Mapping Project for Pets of Domestic Violence Victims, which allows searching by zip code for sheltering services for pets of domestic violence survivors: awionline.org/safe-havens
- **RedRover**—A California-based nonprofit dedicated to aiding animals in crisis, RedRover has many resources and educational materials online and also offers grants to survivors of domestic violence to help them meet their pets' needs: redrover.org/resource/domestic-violence-and-pets
- **RedRover's Safe Place for Pets**—Additional resources, including the ability to search for pet sheltering services by city, state, zip code, or province, can be found here: safeplaceforpets.org
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline**—thehotline.org, 800-799-7233 (TTY: 800-787-3224), text LOVEIS to 22522 or 866-331-9474
- **List of states including pets in protection orders**—Compiled and maintained by Michigan State University College of Law's Animal Legal & Historical Center: animallaw.info/article/domestic-violence-and-pets-list-states-include-pets-protection-orders

*Animal Welfare Institute. Facts and myths about domestic violence and animal abuse. awionline.org/content/facts-and-myths-about-domestic-violence-and-animal-abuse; The Humane Society of the United States. Animal cruelty and human violence FAQ. humanesociety.org/resources/animal-cruelty-and-human-violence-faq. Both accessed June 17, 2020.