

A Safe Place



for Pets and People

Keeping the Whole Family Together

by Katie Linek

Housing. Education. Employment. These are the services that take top priority when helping homeless families achieve self-sufficiency. More and more however, service providers are noticing the existence of a large—but adorable—barrier to receiving these vital services: pets.

Nearly 70 percent of American households have pets. For many families, their animal companions are far more than just a pet—they are like a child, a sibling, or a best friend, providing unconditional love and support. Unfortunately, a majority of homeless shelters do not have the resources to house pets, leaving families with a difficult decision—give up an important member of the family or continue down the path of homelessness. In the case of people facing homelessness because of domestic violence, it can mean the choice between saving a loved one—the pet—or saving themselves. Too often, the result is families living in unsafe and unstable conditions—in their car, on the street, bouncing from couch to couch, or with an abuser—rather than sacrifice their beloved pet.

Shanna Dyott considers her mixed lab, Baby Girl, to be part of the family. Baby Girl has been with Shanna through the birth of her two sons, and is like a sister to them. When Shanna was let go from her job, the Dyotts were unable to make ends meet and were forced to leave their Arizona home, staying in a car for two weeks. “We had Baby Girl, and there was no one who would take her,” says Dyott.

That is why organizations across the country are stepping up to help keep homeless families together—including their pets. “We recognized that for the vast majority of families experiencing homelessness, if they want to receive services, they are

not going to be able to keep their pets,” explains Claas Ehlers, director of affiliate services for Family Promise, a Summit, New Jersey-based nonprofit operating nationally that helps homeless and low-income families through a variety of programs. “We recognized that was an area we could have a specific impact on.”

Family Promise’s Arizona affiliate was able to provide the Dyotts a place to stay with Baby Girl. “For them to be able to help us out in this way ... it kept our family together,” says Dyott.

Family Promise provides shelter for families through a national network of interdenominational congregations, and has day centers where families can take showers, receive case management, and look for housing and jobs. In 2012, Family Promise partnered with pet supply retailer PetSmart to create PetSmart Promise, a program that provides options for homeless families to keep their pets while on the road to stable housing. The partnership expands existing Family Promise day centers throughout the country to include facilities for the pets of families who are temporarily homeless.

The PetSmart Promise program offers different options based on the needs of the family and the limitations of the Family Promise affiliate they are working with. The program offers on-site pet sanctuaries, free off-site boarding at PetsHotels, or a pet-fostering program for affiliates without access to a sanctuary or PetsHotel. By the end of 2015, PetSmart will have created 12 pet sanctuaries at affiliated sites across the country—ensuring that not only can families keep their pets; they will be able to interact with them every day.

“PetSmart wanted to make sure that with every one of our 182

affiliates, no family would go into shelter and have to lose their pet,” says Ehlers.

In New York City, the Mayor’s Alliance for NYC’s Animals, an animal welfare organization founded to reduce the rate at which New York City animals were being euthanized, began their Helping Pets and People in Crisis program in 2007. The program helps pet owners in difficult circumstances such as homelessness, domestic violence, illness, natural disasters, and other emergencies. They do this by offering creative solutions aimed at keeping pets with their families or reuniting them quickly once their situation is stabilized.

More than 70 percent of pet owners who enter shelter report that the abuser has threatened, injured, or killed family pets. Up to 65 percent of domestic violence survivors stay in abusive situations or delay leaving out of fear of what would happen if they left their pets.

Jenny Coffey, a social worker who spearheaded the program confirms, “In traditional services, there is a major gap for pet owners facing crisis—we address those challenges head on.”

For homeless families, Helping Pets and People in Crisis will assist with emergency planning, such as helping to identify a friend, family member, or neighbor who could house the animal. They will also explore whether the pet is an Emotional Service Animal, a dog belonging to a person suffering from emotional or psychological disabilities, providing the pet owner with rights to have their pet nearby.

Supporting Healthy and Happy Pets

Those who do not enter shelter often still need help supporting their pet. Pets require food, toys, and often times, veterinary visits to stay happy and healthy. Individuals and families will care for pets on what limited resources they have.

Coffey explains that Helping Pets and People in Crisis provides resources for these families as well. “We can assess the animal and put in place low-cost or free veterinary care for spaying/neutering and vaccinations, as well as provide basic supplies such as a crate or pet food.”

Nevada-based nonprofit organization Pets of the Homeless also provides pet food and emergency veterinary care to the home-

less in communities across the United States and Canada. They have given care to over 12,000 pets, providing vaccinations, treating illnesses and injuries, as well as spaying and neutering. In addition, they have provided 355 tons of pet food and supplies to homeless and low-income pet owners.

“When faced with homelessness, what will become of a pet that you love?” asks Pets of the Homeless Founder, Genevieve Frederick. “The choices are harsh and many will not abandon or give them up. Our task, nationwide, is to relieve the anguish and anxiety of the homeless who cannot provide for their pets.”

“To have your pet sick and your hands tied, unable to get them care ... that is a horrible place to be,” says Esperanza Zuñiga, program manager for Sacramento, CA-based RedRover, a national nonprofit that provides small grants to low-income families who cannot afford veterinary care for their pet, along with other life-changing grants. “We try to fill the small gap preventing them from getting the treatment to happen.”

RedRover provides financial assistance to individuals and organizations in an effort to break down the barrier pets present to families seeking help. “Our mission is to preserve and strengthen the human-animal bond and to bring animals from crisis to care, so when we learned about this barrier, we began creating programs to help pet owners during difficult times,” says Zuñiga.

For families and individuals resistant to entering shelter or receiving services for themselves, receiving help to save the life of a pet may increase willingness to receive other types of assistance. For example, once the pet is healthy and trust has developed between an individual and an organization, steps can then be taken to get them connected to the services they need. Coffey explains, “The pet is often an access point to engage with an individual—by helping the pet, a person may be more willing and able to accept help that will lead them both to safety and stability.”

Helping Families Heal, Together

Homelessness can be extremely traumatic. Along with their home, people experiencing it often lose their sense of safety and stability while facing the stigma and marginalization associated with homelessness. For survivors of domestic violence, this loss and trauma is multiplied.

“A lot of people do not realize that when you are a survivor of domestic violence and you make the really tough decision to leave, you leave everything behind,” says Jennifer White-Reid, vice president of domestic violence services for the Urban Resource Institute (URI), New York City’s second largest pro-

vider of domestic violence services. “They leave their family and their friends, their communities, their personal belongings, their computers, their books ... and for those who feel like they have to leave their pets behind, it is so traumatic.” URI operates four domestic violence shelters with a total of 438 beds in Brooklyn and Manhattan, serving about 1,400 adults and children each year.

“In our work, we seek to save lives by offering a wide array of services including safe, confidential housing, case management, counseling, job training, children’s services, and mental health counseling,” says White-Reid. “We also provide community education and promote innovative best practices that would reduce barriers to safety.”

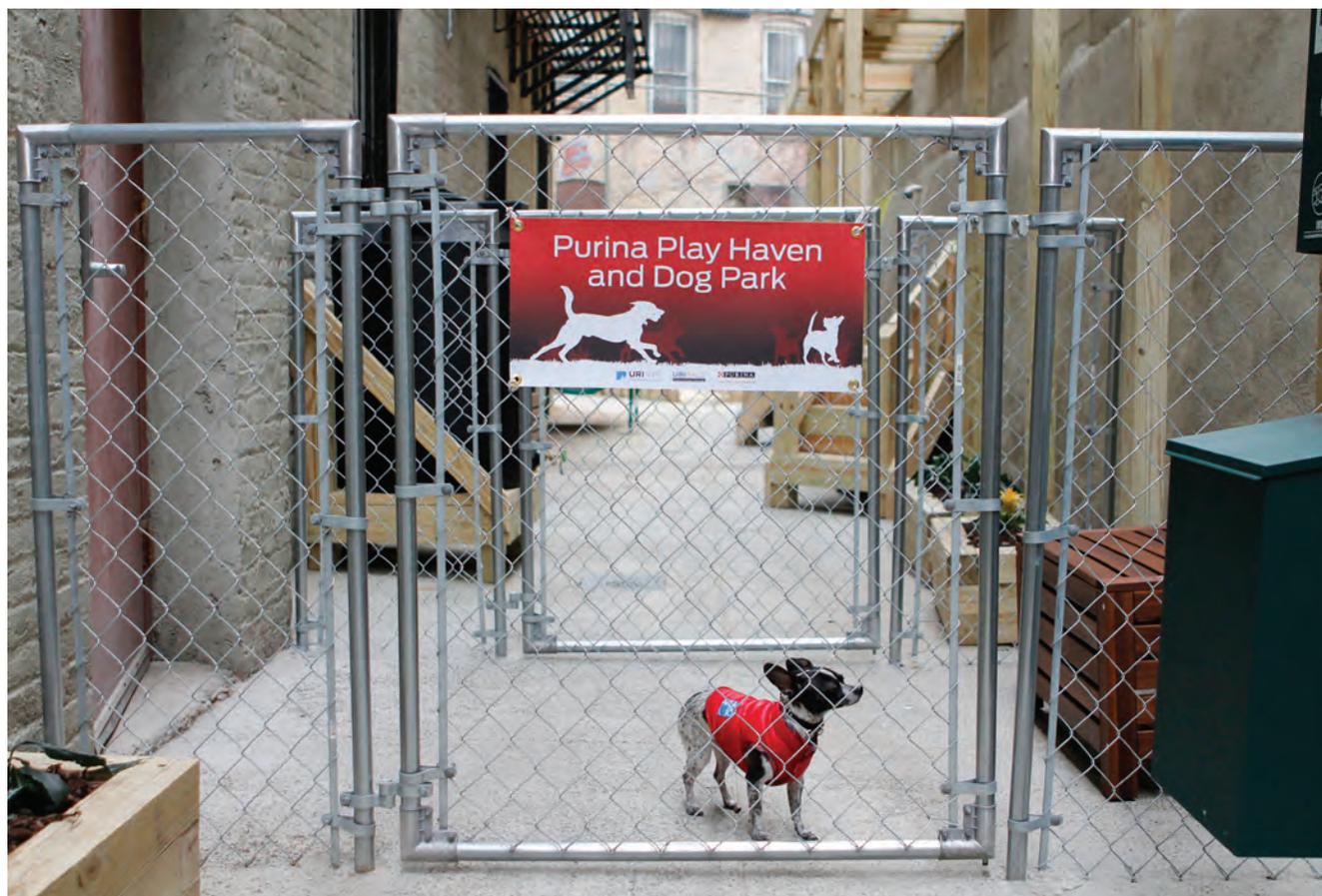
URI is the first organization in New York City—and one of few nationwide—to welcome pets into domestic violence shelters. “We want the family to heal together. To leave a situation where you are in crisis and to leave your pet that, for many survivors are part of the family, it is only adding additional trauma. So we offer an opportunity for them to be comforted by all of their family members while in shelter,” says White-Reid.

Essentially losing a member of the family intensifies the distress felt by survivors. Along with grieving the loss of the life they had, those who are forced to surrender a pet are also grieving the loss of a loved one.

URI is not the only organization to recognize the importance of limiting additional trauma to families. “We serve families no matter what their composition. We do not separate families. Why would we exclude the pets?” asks Ehlers of Family Promise. Homeless shelters generally serve very specific populations; while there are many places for homeless men or for homeless women with children, many shelters will not accept families with single fathers or two-parent families because adult men are often not allowed to stay in family shelters. Some shelters will not even accept teenage boys. Even more will not accept pets.

Compounding the grief of not having a beloved pet during a time of crisis is concern about the safety and well-being of the pet that was left behind. More than 70 percent of pet owners who enter shelter report that the abuser has threatened, injured, or killed family pets. Up to 65 percent of domestic violence survivors stay in abusive situations or delay leaving out of fear

In 2014, the Urban Resource Institute and Purina expanded the URIPALS program with the opening of the Purina Play Haven—New York City’s first dog park in a domestic violence shelter—so that dogs like Pepper can play and exercise while living with their families in shelter.



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The link between domestic violence and animal abuse serves as one of the primary areas of focus in the field of veterinary social work, an area of social work that concentrates on the human needs that arise in the relationship between humans and animals. “We promote awareness of the link between domestic violence and animal violence,” says Melissa Holcombe, a veterinary social worker and school social worker/homeless liaison for Catoosa County, Georgia.

Due to growing evidence of the frequent co-occurrence of animal abuse and domestic violence, 29 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico now include animals on orders of protection, a legal order issued by a state court that requires one person to stop harming another person—or in this case, a person and their pet.

“Many of these families consider their pets to be like their children. The bond is that strong. Because of this, they have found that many women will simply not leave because they do not know what their pet will face without them,” explains Zuñiga from RedRover. “The pet will be a pawn in these situations. The abuser will say, ‘If you leave I am going to kill the pet’ or ‘Watch me do this to the pet and you are going to be next.’”

“Animals are often used by perpetrators to manipulate and prevent their partners from leaving,” adds Holcombe.

That is actually how the Helping Pets and People in Crisis program in New York City began. “Faced with domestic violence, a family refused to leave the situation because their dog, Maggie, would have been harmed,” says Coffey. “The Alliance accepted Maggie and found a foster home which lasted nearly nine months. The family secured a pet-friendly apartment and was able to reclaim their family dog. We believed that these situations happened a lot and felt that pet owners needed more support—especially if they were faced with circumstances beyond their control.”

Zuñiga tells the story of a woman in Kansas City, Missouri whose husband was attacking her with a hammer when the woman’s Great Dane lay down over her body to protect her and sustained the majority of the blows. The shelter she went to had a “no pet” policy, but she refused to leave him, so the shelter made a few phone calls and changed the policy that night. “It was so obvious why he had done what he had done and why she was not willing to leave him behind.” The pair will be included in an upcoming documentary titled *The Deadly Link*, about the connection between animal abuse and domestic violence.



The Alle-Kiski Area HOPE Center in Tarentum, PA built on-site housing for the pets of domestic violence survivors through a RedRover Safe Housing grant and the help of Sheltering Animals & Families Together.

Even more upsetting, many survivors will go back to an abusive relationship because of the pet. “We heard from a lot of survivors before we started this program,” says White-Reid about URI’s program, “about the grieving they experienced while they were in shelter and why some of them may have returned back to the relationship and put themselves in danger to check on their pet.”

Despite this, only an estimated five percent of domestic violence shelters have the ability to house pets on-site.

A Safe Place for Survivors

After a client of former Michigan prosecuting attorney Allie Phillips returned to her abusive husband in order keep her two dogs and goat safe, Phillips did some research and could not find a domestic violence shelter that would house pets. That is when she knew something needed to be done. She began developing guidelines for shelters to start programs for pets. In 2008, Phillips launched Sheltering Animals & Families Together, the first and

only global initiative that guides family violence shelters in implementing programs to welcome families with pets.

In 2012, working with the Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals and Sheltering Animals & Families Together, URI launched PALS—People and Animals Living Safely. URI also teamed up with Purina, united by the belief that “people and pets are better together.”

Muriel Raggi, a domestic violence survivor who was previously in shelter, says she is thankful to URI and the Alliance for recognizing how important pets are in people's lives. “I remember lying in bed at night, with so many fears and worries swirling in my head, wishing I could have my dog Jasmine next to me to provide raw affection, comfort, and support,” says Raggi. “URI-PALS will ensure that other survivors with pets will not face the heartbreaking choices I did.”

“Clients stay about six months to a year, which is a significant time to be away from a part of your family,” says White-Reid. “When we were exploring our options, boarding was not an option. Being away from them for that long, how are you continuing your relationship with the animal? How are they offering you comfort and support?”

RedRover also recognized the importance of providing a safe place for pets when trying to help survivors. That is why they offer Safe Escape Grants to pay for temporary boarding and/or veterinary care, enabling domestic violence survivors to remove their pets from an abusive situation and bring them to safety.

Lynn, her two-year-old daughter, and their one-year-old dog named Coco, constantly witnessed disturbing behavior from Lynn's abuser. Lynn gained the courage to leave their abuser and fled to a nearby domestic violence shelter in Arkansas. Although the shelter was unable to house pets on site, Lynn's case manager knew about RedRover's emergency grant program and helped her get a Safe Escape grant that paid for 30 nights of emergency boarding for Coco and enabled the entire family to start a new life.

“My dog is everything to me, she is all I have left in my life. She is my baby,” says another Safe Escape Grant recipient from Illinois. “[RedRover is] a wonderful organization to help people in need, at a rough time in their life.”

According to Zuñiga, RedRover has provided over 6,000 nights of boarding for these pets. They soon realized however, that providing boarding was just a temporary solution. “We realized this was bringing animals from crisis to care, but it is a band-aid. We wanted to think more long-term. In 2012,” she says proudly, “we launched our Safe Housing Grant program, where we

provide grants to help shelters purchase building supplies and materials in order to set up on-site facilities.”

Partnering with Sheltering Animals & Families Together, they have provided grants to 23 domestic violence shelters since 2012. In 2013, they launched SafePlaceForPets.org, a searchable directory of domestic violence shelters for families with pets.

A Sense of Normalcy

Experiencing homelessness, witnessing the abuse of a pet or loved one, or experiencing abuse themselves can have numerous negative outcomes for children and families. Research has shown that up to 76 percent of animal cruelty in the home occurs in front of children, who often intervene or allow themselves to be victimized to save their pets from being harmed or killed. Animal cruelty coincides with outbursts against human family members more than 50 percent of the time.

According to one study, “children who are exposed to domestic violence are nearly three times more likely to treat animals with cruelty than children who are not exposed to such violence.” The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence claims that 32 percent of mothers in a domestic violence shelter reported that their children had hurt or killed animals.

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“It is extremely traumatic for a child to witness animal abuse. That child then has an increased likelihood of committing those acts,” explains Zuñiga. “Children who observed acts of violence in the home prior to the family leaving were already copying the abuser. In terms of coping strategies, what does this child now do when they are angry? When they are sad? And unfortunately that pet can be the first thing they use as an outlet. So many of these abusive situations are cyclical.” Fortunately, when the whole family, including the pet, is brought to safety, the child can see the value placed on the life of their pet and begin to learn the proper way to relate to and treat animals.

The chronic stress faced by children who have experienced homelessness and/or domestic violence may also lead to

several problems. Prolonged stress in children has been shown to impair brain development, cause behavioral problems, negatively affect coping abilities, cause depression and anxiety, and strain social relationships. Specialized programming targeted toward this vulnerable population can mitigate the effects of this stress though, emphasizing the importance of getting families into shelter as soon as possible. Allowing pets to join their families eliminates one more obstacle to getting them there.

“We want families to receive services,” says Ehlers of Family Promise. “We want to be able to work with families, to empower them out of homelessness and if they are not receiving services they are far less likely to get on a pathway towards self-sufficiency.”

The shortage of homeless shelters that accept pets has an added layer of complexity for unaccompanied youth, points out Holcombe, who works with unaccompanied youth as a school social worker and homeless liaison. “We do things in the community to try and support these kids to make sure that they take advantage of the educational system, graduate, and become productive members of society,” she explains. “According to my research, there are a lot of kids who have pets, but will not go to get help or go to school because they do not have anywhere to keep their pets. The very thing that they need—education—they will not get.”

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Concern for a pet who was left behind can also be a distraction for many children and youth when they should be learning. “The kids focus on and worry about their pets, almost to the point of obsession,” says Holcombe.

In addition, the consistency and stability provided by the presence of family pets support children’s social and emotional development, as well as providing a sense of normalcy in what is likely a chaotic life. To aid in providing this sense of normalcy, PetSmart donated and installed over 80 aquariums at Family Promise affiliates across the country. The fish are used to teach children about the care and responsibility needed when owning a pet. “It calms and centers the kids,” explains Ehlers. “It is little things like that that provide a normative element that children experiencing homelessness can often lack.”

Pets provide both children and adults with comfort and support during a very difficult and scary time in their lives. “Pets can provide a tremendous healing power,” says Zuñiga. “They can provide so much comfort to us. There is not only relief in knowing that you have not left your ‘child’ behind, but as a survivor you also get to benefit from your relationship with your pet.”

“When you talk about that bond, that unconditional love that the kids and adults get from their pets ... not having that takes away a large potential for coping,” adds Holcombe.

In fact, studies show that having a pet can reduce blood pressure, heart disease, and stress, while improving one’s mood. Pets give a sense of belonging and meaning as well as a greater sense of control.

Bringing Communities Together

The building of facilities for pets and the implementation of these programs have had an unexpected, but welcome side effect: bringing communities together.

“A lot of times when it comes to the construction of these shelters, the Eagle Scouts will come do it or a construction company offers to donate their time,” says Zuñiga. “It is really neat to see how proud these communities are of their programs.”

Ehlers adds, “It is all about creating that community; creating that interaction between people experiencing homelessness and the people who want to help. Together, they can create these community transformations.”

“What is equally awesome is that when these communities, who previously did not have anything to do with pets, reach out to their donor pool with this new effort to help pets, their community rises up with donations and food and treats and toys so that they can sustain their programs,” Zuñiga continues. “It is really beautiful.”

Ehlers confirms that adding pets to the mix has expanded their donor base. “Our affiliates that have built the PetSmart Promise sanctuaries have had people send them checks that they have never heard of before with the subject line reading ‘Cat Lover.’”

More importantly, pet programs are changing communities’ perceptions about family homelessness. “There are people who do not understand family homelessness, but if you ask them what a homeless family is supposed to do with the dog that they have had since their child was a baby, they get it,” explains Ehlers. “It breaks down that ‘otherness.’”

The public perception of homelessness is often the idea of a man on the street, with mental health or substance abuse issues. Pet initiatives draw in new volunteers and remind them that homeless families are just like any other family.

“What you prevalingly see is people not understanding that first of all, people experiencing homelessness often have jobs; people experiencing homelessness often have an education; people experiencing homelessness are as committed to their families as families who are housed,” says Ehlers.

Overcoming Fear

Implementing these programs is far from easy though; initiatives to care for the pets of homeless families have a wide variety of factors to consider. Will pets be housed in a resident’s room, in an indoor or outdoor kennel on-site, boarded off-site, or fostered?

There are also concerns about allergies, odors, noise, pet health and medications, cleaning up waste, pet hygiene, the size and type of animals allowed, and the comfort of the pets, including physical comfort (will dogs have enough room to run and play?) and psychological comfort.

For many animals, leaving home—even an abusive one—can be extremely stressful, especially if they need to be housed in smaller quarters. This stress and/or a history of being abused or witnessing the abuse of their owner can cause aggression. Many times, shelters will actually bring in a behaviorist to address these issues. Counseling may also be provided to residents who have witnessed the abuse of their pet, which can cause significant trauma and psychological damage to both adults and children.

White-Reid tells the story of a client who came in with her seven-year-old daughter and their cat Chowder. “Her abuser did a number of things to threaten her cat including placing him in the closet, leaving him out in the cold, and tying him up, placing him in the microwave, and threatening to turn it on if she did not do what he ordered her to do. In shelter, if someone knocked on the door, Chowder would run and hide. We partnered with the ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) and they brought in a behaviorist who worked with Chowder, the mom, and the daughter on several behavioral techniques to help Chowder overcome his fear. And it really worked. During the time that they were with us, we saw a radical change in Chowder’s behavior. He became more playful and he did not run and hide any longer.”

To guide organizations through the complicated process of opening their doors to pets, Allie Phillips from Sheltering Animals &

Families Together created a detailed start-up manual that breaks down the factors involved. In it, Phillips recommends three essential policies:

- Partnering with an animal protection organization for guidance on animal housing issues, local regulations and ordinances impacting the housing of animals, and to assist when difficult complications arise.
- Working with a veterinarian to provide medical care, such as an initial examination to determine if the pet has been abused or neglected and needs treatment; general care such as updating vaccinations, flea and parasite treatment, or spaying/neutering; emergency care in the case of illness or injury; and to offer an expert opinion in court if the need should arise to verify animal cruelty.
- Only allowing the family and designated shelter staff to interact with each pet for the safety of other residents and staff.

With the help of Phillips, URI created a model that was safe and beneficial for all involved. “We recognized the importance of partnering with animal welfare experts in order to make sure that the program was safe for everybody—the clients who had pets and those who did not, as well as the staff,” White-Reid explains. “We came up with a wonderful model that includes staff training, pet safety education, pet food and supplies, transportation—all sorts of things to make sure they are happy and healthy while they are in shelter with their family.”

“Then we work on discharge planning,” White-Reid continues, “to help families identify what needs their pet may have, and to be sure that when they transition to permanent housing there are pet-friendly options available.”

‘Why We Do What We Do’

Although the process is complicated, each organization agrees that the effort is worth it.

“I go on site visits and I see first hand the impact that we have had,” says Zuñiga. “I have had ladies run up to me in tears, crying, and hugging me saying, ‘If it was not for you, I would not be here,’ but here she is with her two cats. It reminds us that this is why we do what we do.”

“We can see real life progress in families,” says White-Reid. “We get to see the adults heal and blossom as they transition into permanent housing and we see the same for the pets.” ■