

Creating a Community of Care: DV Survivors, Homeless Families, and Their Pets

By Danielle Emery



Launched in 2013, the People and Animals Living Safely (PALS) program, an initiative of the Urban Resource Institute (URI), serves domestic violence (DV) survivors with pets. Our shelters are among the less than five percent of DV shelters nationwide to offer co-living, where people are housed along with their companion animals in individual units while healing, helping survivors and their entire families access safety.

The PALS program operates at the intersection of social services and animal welfare. Research has shown that when there is violence in a home, all members of that home—both people and animals—are at risk and need access to safety. We also understand that pets are an integral part of a family, and especially acknowledge the importance of the human-animal bond for those who have experienced trauma. URI released “The PALS Report and Survey” in May 2021, including the findings of a 2019 survey conducted with the National Domestic Violence Hotline. The survey reinforced the notion that pets are an important part of a survivor’s family, with 91 percent of respondents saying their pet was critical to their own survival and healing, and 97 percent stating that keeping their pet with them was

providing shelter and services to homeless families be aware of and sensitive to the intersection of homelessness and domestic violence, and be equipped to accommodate families with pets in order to help as many survivors as possible.

At the 2020 ICPH *Beyond Housing* conference, URI hosted a site visit to PALS Place, the first domestic violence shelter of its size built specifically with pets in mind. We talked about our journey to success, from burgeoning idea to impactful and growing initiative, and as a shining example of what is possible with the co-living model. We started as a domestic violence shelter provider dedicated to serving our clients, noticed a gap in those services for clients with pets, and chose to act to fill this need. We are now in a position to share the lessons we’ve learned during this process and are pleased to have this opportunity to provide more information on where we started and updates on how far we’ve come since that 2020 visit, in hopes that it will jumpstart similar initiatives around the country.

Incorporating Pets into Shelter Settings—Addressing Concerns

When URI first launched the PALS program in 2013, we could not have imagined that within eight years we would have successfully welcomed close to 350 families and 450 pets to the program. What began with 10 pet-friendly units in one shelter facility has since grown to nearly 500 units in eight fully pet-friendly shelter buildings across New York City. On any given night, more than 50 families with close to 75 pets reside in URI’s shelters. Although all 500 units are designated as pet-friendly, DV survivors both with and without pets utilize the units on an as-needed basis. This did not happen overnight. As more people learn about the program, we have more families with pets entering our doors. The growth and success of the PALS program has been steady, at a pace matching our organizational capacity, funding, and resources — all important things to consider when taking on this type of initiative.

We started the PALS program without program-specific staff and with no institutional experience welcoming animals in our buildings. This was unfamiliar territory for our agency, and there were many concerns and anxieties from staff and residents: “What about allergies?,” “What happens if an animal becomes aggressive?,”

What would you say is the primary role your pet plays in your survivorship/healing?



an important factor in seeking shelter. Additionally, concern for a pet’s safety and the lack of family shelters that can accommodate pets are critical reasons why survivors may delay leaving an abusive situation or return to a dangerous environment. Fifty percent of respondents to the PALS survey said they would not seek shelter if they could not take their pets with them. This data corresponds with what experience in the field has consistently shown: pets are essential in survivors’ lives, and the lack of programs that include animals as family members is a significant barrier to accessing safety.

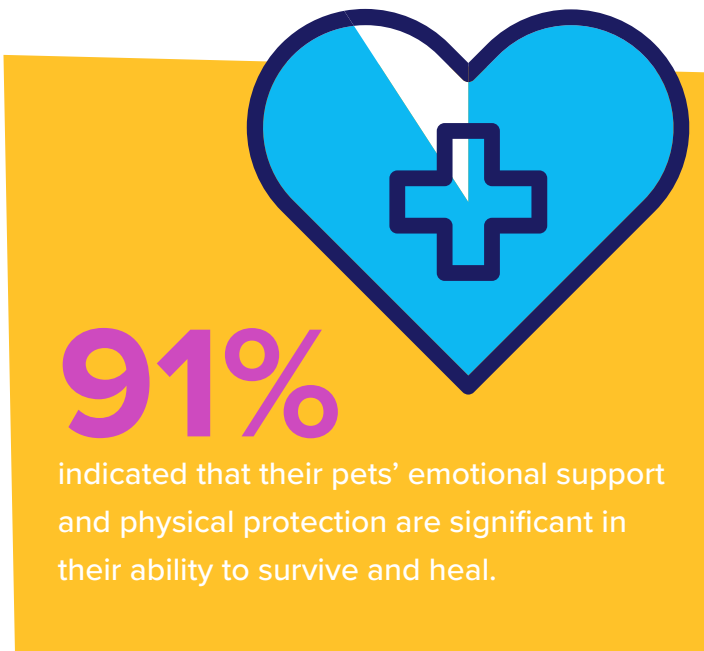
It is also impossible to disentangle domestic violence from family homelessness. Domestic violence shelter systems across the country are intended to provide emergency respite for survivors in crisis. By design, survivors who enter these shelters leave behind their homes and belongings for safety, more often than not becoming homeless in order to flee abuse. New York City’s city-funded domestic violence shelter system is vast, housing 6,400 adults and children each year, but remains woefully inadequate to accommodate every DV survivor seeking safe shelter. A 2019 NYC Comptroller’s report identified domestic violence as the leading cause for homelessness within the NYC homeless family shelter system—over 41 percent of families cited it as the primary reason—a dramatic 44 percent increase over the preceding five years. It is imperative that agencies

72%

of respondents were not aware that some shelters accept pets.



“Will I have to interact with animals?” PALS has fielded these questions internally as the program has expanded to multiple URI shelters. The average social service worker is already busy. The average shelter has few vacancies, with some maintaining waiting lists depending on the locale. So, the new and complicating factors involved in adding people’s pets were an understandable source of worry for both staff and residents. Additionally, most of our staff



members did not begin working in social services with the intent of working in close proximity to animals. But we understood that by welcoming pets into shelter, we were able to welcome more humans into shelter. We knew the need for pet-friendly shelter was pressing, and we were determined to build a program that would address these concerns while still providing a critical service to survivors.

In our experience, these anxieties and fears have been unfounded. To date, no staff member or resident has been injured by a pet. Allergies are not a frequent issue. Animals are not running loose or presenting a frequent disturbance to the shelter environment. Providers can avoid potential snags in their pet program by designing a strong initiative and addressing such concerns and needs before animals are ever brought into shelter. The work we did in designing, implementing, and scaling our program as our capacity grew has been key in our success.

The vast majority of PALS pets are dogs, cats, and other small animals. They are pets who have been part of the family for at least a year and are very familiar with bustling city life, interacting with children, and with the noise and congestion that comes with apartment living. Children and adults alike have strong bonds with these animals. Our intake process includes a number of questions designed to determine the pet’s temperament, and we find that dogs, both large and small, are often socialized to be friendly to or ignore strangers. Those that may not have been well socialized due to abuse or other factors are kept under close watch by family members to avoid incidents in shelter.

For those entering shelters due to domestic violence, the process of entering shelter can be a physically and emotionally draining

endeavor. We ask a great deal of our clients: they must show up to an unfamiliar location, sometimes giving up or changing a job for their safety. We also ask them to apply for public benefits, so that they can access all available services. While living in a shelter, they must comply with curfews and other rules that may be new to them. In allowing residents to keep a family pet, we are giving them some peace of mind and a stable source of comfort. Retaining their pet means they do not have to separate temporarily or permanently with an important member of their family. It also means that children—and adults—do not have to be further traumatized by separating from their furry friend.

Once new clients with pets are accepted, they must speak with a member of the PALS team to discuss the expectations and responsibilities for having a pet in the shelter setting. Just as clients are expected to meet curfew and other guidelines on site, they must also be responsible for the care of their pet and agree to avoid unnecessary interactions between their pets and other residents. Once clients have acclimated, many staff members at URI say that it’s easy to forget that there are pets residing at their site, since clients take such attentive care of their animals.

We in the PALS program want to share this experience with providers across the country to assure them that while we had fears and anxieties when starting our program, in our nearly 10 years of experience, the benefits have far outweighed any concerns. When handled appropriately, introducing a pet program into your shelter can be another avenue in which you can connect with your clients, reduce trauma, and encourage their positive growth.

Creating a Community of Care

When URI began exploring how to welcome pets into our shelters, we knew that collaboration with other providers—particularly those specializing in animal welfare—would be integral to our program’s success. No single service provider can address every aspect of the complex and unique life experiences of a DV survivor or family experiencing homelessness. Collaboration with animal welfare organizations in your community are paramount to the success of any co-sheltering program. Fortunately, many in animal welfare are ready and willing to work with shelter and social service providers to expand services, keep families together, and prevent pet surrender.

The field of animal welfare has been moving towards a more people-centered approach to helping animals in need, recognizing that caring for animals requires caring for the people who love and care for them. This change has been especially notable over the past two years, as both animal welfare and social services have responded to the COVID-19 crisis. For many Americans, changing employment circumstances and public health measures enacted in response to the pandemic resulted in an extraordinary amount of time spent at home. Animal rescues experienced an unprecedented rate of pet adoptions, and many across the country reported that their pets were a significant factor in managing stress levels during otherwise isolating times.

As a shelter provider, we know this work is complex and demanding, and are not suggesting that agencies immediately begin accepting pets into their facilities. But we are encouraging potential providers consider the issue and begin exploring ways your agency could provide support and resources to people with pets. We and others doing this work across the country are available to provide

guidance and direction. URI and PALS can provide training and technical assistance, and resources and training opportunities are also available via the Co-Sheltering Collaborative, Red Rover, SAF-T, Human Animal Support Services, and others.

PALS operates with the belief that all people who have animals in their families deserve access to resources and services in order to remain together, no matter what compounding factors they are experiencing. This includes survivors of domestic violence and both individuals and families experiencing homelessness. But no one is suggesting you do this work totally on your own! Service providers and organizations can and should collaborate across disciplines to contribute to a community of care that addresses all of the needs of individuals and families recovering from domestic violence and experiencing homelessness, including provisions for family pets.

Pushing for Change

There are a number of actions that individuals, agencies, and advocates for policy change can take in advancing resources available to domestic violence survivors and those experiencing homelessness with pets. If you work with clients, collect data on the number of families and individuals you serve that either have pets, or recently relinquished or re-homed pets due to their circumstances. Your



local animal shelter may already have some of this data regarding the animals that come into their care—working with them to compile comprehensive data will help you understand the scope of the problem and provide ammunition in advocating for policy change and funding in your community.

There is funding available to providers across the country to support co-sheltering and other programs geared toward helping people and their pets. Originally passed as part of the 2019 Farm Bill, the bipartisan Pet and Women Safety (PAWS) Act is a grant program that provides Congressional funding to enable domestic violence shelters to become pet-friendly and allow survivors and

pets to seek safe shelter. In the last two years, the PAWS Act has distributed \$4.5 million to providers across the country to support programs for domestic violence survivors with pets. Pet Smart Charities, Red Rover, and other small foundations also have grants available for all types of human services agencies seeking to provide supports to clients with pets.

If pets are present in your or your loved ones' lives, as they are in nearly 70 percent of American households, consider the joy and comfort they provide and use that experience to advocate for others with pets. There are actions both small and large you can take to help those experiencing homelessness with pets, and there is assistance available no matter what level of action you are looking to take. Reach out to other providers in your community, begin or continue conversations about how to incorporate pets and how that ultimately serves human clients, and most importantly, ask for help! Only by working together can we move towards a shelter system that recognizes the importance of animals in people's lives and provides supports and resources to keep families together and safe.

Danielle Emery is the People and Animals Living Safely (PALS) director at Urban Resource Institute (URI). For almost a decade, the organization has offered training and technical assistance on the PALS program to all types of providers, including domestic violence and other social services, as well as to animal welfare organizations. URI helps transform the lives of domestic violence survivors and homeless families with a focus on communities of color and other vulnerable populations. URI is the largest provider of domestic violence shelter services in the U.S.

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