

# National Survey on Domestic Violence and Pets: Breaking Barriers to Safety and Healing

The Urban Resource Institute (URI) and the National Domestic Violence Hotline (The Hotline) announce the results of the largest nationwide survey in the United States of domestic violence survivors focused on the impact of pets on survivors' ability to leave a dangerous situation. The findings are clear: fear for the welfare of pets is a barrier that keeps survivors from leaving abusive situations to find safety and healing. Additionally, once in a safe location, separation from a beloved pet creates an additional trauma.

URI, a pioneer in providing safety and services for domestic violence survivors and their pets, partnered with The Hotline to conduct a 13-question survey to gather the most extensive and comprehensive national data available on how the consideration of pets affects domestic violence victims' options and decision-making. The survey interviewed nearly 2,500 individuals across the United States who called, texted, or chatted online with The Hotline for support. The survey focused on how survivors felt about pets in relation to their experiences of abuse, their considerations when seeking safety for themselves and their pets, and their awareness of resources for survivors with pets needing to escape an abusive situation.

This is the first time The Hotline has conducted a survey about the impact of pets, and the survey confirms and expands upon previous findings that had only touched the surface of the complex role pets play in domestic violence survivors' experience and decision-making before they have secured safe shelter. The results indicate and reinforce that pets are a crucial component of a survivor's family unit that should be kept safe and together, and failing to provide pet accommodations and services inhibits many survivors from seeking shelter. The Hotline/URI survey also reveals that despite a growing number of domestic violence shelters that accommodate pets (either on site or in partner animal services), survivors' awareness of these programs remains low, creating additional risk to both people and animals impacted by domestic violence. Among the less than 10% of domestic violence shelters that accommodate pets are the shelters of the URI People and Animals Living Safely (PALS) program, which provides co-living and services for people with their pets.

## Key findings include:

**97%**

of respondents said that keeping their pets with them is an important factor in deciding whether or not to seek shelter.

**50%**

of respondents would not consider shelter for themselves if they could not take their pets with them.

**48%**

were worried that the abuser would harm or kill the pets;

**37%**

reported that the abuser had already threatened to harm or kill pets; and

**29%**

said pets had already been harmed or killed.

**30%**

said their children had witnessed or been aware of abuse or threats to a pet.

**91%**

indicated that their pets' emotional support and physical protection are significant in their ability to survive and heal.

**76%**

of respondents reported noticeable changes in their pets' behavior as a result of abuse.

**72%**

of respondents were not aware that some domestic violence shelters accept pets. (Currently, only about 250 shelters in the U.S. are pet-friendly and many others have foster care arrangements for pets.)

## The key takeaways from the survey:

- This is the first study of its kind to interview survivors in a moment of outreach and decision-making, in contrast to studies of survivors already settled in a shelter and removed from their abusive environment. The results confirmed and expanded upon numerous such studies of survivors in shelter who similarly reported harm and threats to their pets had kept them from leaving an abusive situation.
- Offering shelter and services to animals empowers human survivors to seek safety.
- There is a need to raise awareness among domestic violence victims about the availability of resources that can remove a major barrier to their safety.
- There is a critical need for more shelter options that accommodate pets.
- More research and evaluation are needed of programs addressing the intersection of domestic violence and pets.



## These new findings:

- Provide additional and newer data that will encourage community domestic violence and animal welfare agencies to create partnerships to address shared goals.
- Give corporate supporters, philanthropic funders, legislators, stakeholders, and service providers additional insight into the scope of the link between domestic violence and pets. This includes the need for more public policy, programs, and financial support for domestic violence shelters to establish pet-friendly facilities and programs. This support includes initial capital and ongoing operational needs, such as hiring trauma-informed staffing familiar with the needs of pets and pet owners, maintaining prevention and intervention services, and obtaining pet supplies and veterinary care.
- Reinforce the need for state and national domestic violence crisis hotlines' personnel to consistently include the welfare, status, and housing needs of survivors' pets in their intake. Such information removes a key barrier to victims escaping and enables hotline staff to refer survivors to appropriate shelters that are either pet-friendly or have collaborative programs with community animal organizations. Crisis line staff should also be trained on the highly significant bond between survivors and their pets, especially in moments of crisis, and how keeping the entire family together can enhance healing and recovery.
- Demonstrate the ongoing need for more pet-friendly domestic violence shelters. URI is responding by preparing to launch a nationwide outreach of a Community Response Model of pet housing facilities and foster-care programs for domestic violence shelters that are scalable and adaptable to communities' varying sizes, resources, and needs.

## Background on Pets and Crisis

Decades of research confirm that pets are a significant factor in emergency situations including violence, natural disaster, and other crises. The threat or actual harm of pets is a form of emotional control that serves as a barrier that often prevents survivors of domestic violence from leaving their abusive partners. The emotional attachment that adults and children have for their pets makes the animals “soft targets” that abusive partners may use as point of vulnerability that can coerce and control family members and exert their power over victims. Pets are also instrumental to the emotional support, psychological health, and recovery of people in crisis once they have found safety.



### Urban Resource Institute (URI)

is a nonprofit organization founded in 1980 committed to a world free

of domestic violence, homelessness, poverty, and trauma, where individuals, families, and communities are safe, stable, and thriving. URI is the oldest licensed provider of domestic violence shelter and services in New York State and the largest provider of domestic violence shelter services in the U.S. and a leading provider of shelter and services for homeless families. URI provides services to over 40,000 individuals annually, including prevention, intervention, shelter and direct services in more than 20 locations around New York City, with accommodations for some 1,200 domestic violence victims and 1,500 homeless individuals every night. URI is recognized as a thought leader across the U.S. and beyond, in particular on the intersection of domestic violence and pets. The pioneering URI signature program People and Animals Living Safely (PALS) is the only program of its kind in New York City and the largest in the U.S. to provide co-living shelter for domestic violence survivors and their pets.

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### The National Domestic Violence Hotline (The Hotline)

is a vital service with a mission to answer the call to support and shift power back to those affected by relationship abuse —

24 hours a day, seven days a week,

365 days a year. Established in 1996 and headquartered in Austin, Texas, The Hotline is the only national 24-hour domestic violence crisis line providing compassionate support, life-saving resources, and safety planning services via phone, online chat, and text for people across the United States and in U.S. territories. The Hotline has a strong national reputation as a direct service provider and has become a thought leader around intimate partner violence prevention and intervention by working on collaborative projects, research, and policy advocacy to amplify and support the needs of survivors. The Hotline has answered over 5.5 million call, chat and text contacts since opening, and demand for services continues to increase.

[thehotline.org](http://thehotline.org)

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