

SAFETY NET PROGRAMS FOR PETS

More Help Is Always Needed

By Roxanne Hawn

People who struggle to take care of their pets face many challenges. It's a complicated economic, systemic, and societal issue with no simple answers. The outcomes, however, can be dire. When families strain to find and afford pet-friendly housing, feed themselves and their pets, and locate and pay for veterinary care, many end up rehoming or relinquishing their pets to shelters because they see no other option.

Among 97% of people who consider pets family, the Pew Research Center found that about half rank pets as equal to human family. "So, imagine that bond and how devastating it must be for people who can't take care of their family members, due to circumstances that often are of no fault of their own," says Dr. Bethanie Poe, associate director of operations and education for the Center for Veterinary Social Work at the University of Tennessee (UT).

Safety net programs provide peace of mind via access to essential veterinary care and other needs. "With over 40% of households classified as ALICE [asset limited, income constrained, employed] or in poverty, expanding options for veterinary care access ensures that no pet is left untreated, and no family is left unsupported," says

Dr. Michael J. Blackwell, retired assistant surgeon general, US Public Health Service, and director of the Program for Pet Health Equity, also at UT. "We cannot achieve family health equity without access to veterinary care, and diverse methods are necessary to strengthen the social safety net."

The level and types of resources and the ease of access vary greatly from place



to place. Solutions often require those from human healthcare, veterinary medicine, animal welfare, and social work professions.

Real-World Examples

Here's how people in a variety of roles try to help.

Veterinary Hospital

Dr. Jamie Whittenburg is the director of Kingsgate Animal Hospital in Texas. She says, "At my veterinary hospital,

our team supports pets in need through volunteer work, community outreach, and pet owner education. We also work closely to provide low-cost veterinary care and surgeries to local rescues. Every staff member is given the discretion to use an allotted amount of funds to help pets in need. Our hospital also utilizes an Angel Fund, where they or members of the public can donate money to a fund that is utilized to provide care for pets whose owners may not be able to afford it."

Veterinary Outreach

The Street Dog Coalition is a nonprofit organization that provides free veterinary care to pets of people experiencing homelessness. The coalition provides medical supplies (for instance, core vaccines,

flea/tick control and heartworm disease prevention, microchips, and pharmaceuticals to treat minor medical conditions), and veterinary professionals volunteer their time. It also supports the human-animal bond by addressing restrictions and barriers that put people and pets' health in danger.

The coalition's Dr. Hilary Wheeler admits, "Our ability to expand our reach is limited by financial constraints. We rely on monetary and in-kind donations

from the general public as well as veterinary pharmaceutical manufacturers."

Animal Welfare Organization

Dr. Erin Doyle, a veterinarian board certified in shelter medicine practice, is the senior vice president of animal welfare and veterinary services for the Animal Rescue League of Boston. She explains, "Pets have a positive impact on their owners' physical and mental health, an effect that can be particularly critical for pet owners experiencing crisis and instability. Pets provide companionship, facilitate social connections and physical activity, and can be a source of protection and security. Unfortunately, factors causing instability in the lives of pet owners can also be risk factors for pet relinquishment, or for pet owners sacrificing their own well-being to provide for that of their animals."

Dr. Doyle adds that co-sheltering of people with their pets helps avoid the pain of separation from a pet at a time of crisis and unknowns—including natural disasters, homelessness, or domestic violence.

65% of domestic violence survivors have pets. Only 17% of shelters for people fleeing domestic violence allow pets.¹

Homeless Services

My Dog Is My Home is a national nonprofit organization that works at the intersection between human homelessness and animal welfare. Christine Kim, the organization's founder, explains that people often must choose between staying with their pets or accessing shelter, housing, or other types of social services.

"[These services] more often than not have 'no pets allowed' rules," she says. "We at My Dog Is My Home just think that's a decision that no one should

TYPES OF SAFETY NET PROGRAMS FOR PETS

- Accessible and affordable veterinary care
- Veterinary care grants and grants from organizations like Grey Muzzle (see page 12)
- Free pet food from pet food pantries
- Free pet supplies (such as collars, leashes, harnesses, cat carriers, toys, and bowls) from animal and human welfare organizations
- Emergency, short-term housing/boarding for pets of people in crisis
- Domestic violence shelters allowing pets or partnering with others to house pets nearby
- Homeless shelters and transitional housing that allow pets and/or provide adjacent kennels for pets
- Free pet behavior support resources (hotlines, classes)



have to make, especially nowadays when there is a blueprint for co-sheltering people and pets together. So, our job is to really support organizations in making the transition to pet-friendly policies."

Shelters often fear that accepting pets will result in them being overrun with animals, but Christine says, "That's just not true. Even the largest programs, sheltering organizations that have hundreds of people a night that they provide beds for, at most would say 25% of their clients have pets."

Homelessness service providers also worry about pets biting people, with a strong bias against large dogs. "We do our utmost to really slap down this idea that large dogs are dogs to be afraid of," Christine says. "We really push the understanding that dogs are individuals."

Partnering Platform

Launched in July 2022, BestyBnB is a platform that connects pets in need with free local fostering or boarding. The platform currently partners with



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38 agencies in 14 states. Matt Krentz, one of the platform's founders, says, "People in crisis, who want and need help, will often decline life-saving services if they don't have a temporary home for their beloved pet. BestyBnB was created to remove these barriers."

Individuals and organizations always need more volunteers, foster homes, money, in-kind donations, and wider awareness within the communities they serve. Dr. Wheeler also suggests "encouraging local politicians to recognize the importance of providing safe

housing for people and their pets as well as veterinary services."

Roxanne Hawn is a journalist and author of Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate and award-winning blog, Champion of My Heart.

Of pets not getting veterinary care²:

- Up to 10% don't have a collar/leash or carrier to travel safely.
- Up to 15% don't have reliable, pet-friendly transportation.

Need Help or Want to Help?

Whether you need help or want to help, your veterinary hospital is often the best place to start. The team who provides care to your pets likely knows about organizations available in your community that provide or need help.

OPTIONS FOR MANAGING VETERINARY COSTS

Everyone benefits from planning ahead for routine and urgent veterinary care:

- Pet insurance typically proves most affordable and helpful when purchased for very young pets to avoid exclusions for preexisting conditions.
- Some veterinary hospitals work with third-party financing services such as CareCredit and Scratch Plans to allow payments over time.
- Pet care cost grants from organizations such as Brown Dog Foundation and The Pet Fund help families with urgent veterinary costs.
- Waggle is a nonprofit crowdfunding platform specifically for veterinary care needs.



References: 1. Domestic violence and pets. 25 by 2025. Accessed June 25, 2024. 25by2025.org/domestic-violence-pets; 2. Access to Veterinary Care Coalition. Access to Veterinary Care: Barriers, Current Practice, and Public Policy. December 17, 2018. Accessed July 2, 2024. <https://pphe.utk.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/avcc-report.pdf>