

Pets Can Be a Barrier — or an Open Door — to Ending an Individual’s Homelessness

Written by Kristi Schulenberg November 19, 2018



Street Outreach staff often share a similar story... Someone they know has been living on the street for a long time and continually turns down assistance or shelter. Suddenly, the individual reaches out for help because their service animal or pet needs assistance. For the outreach team, this is a perfect opportunity to finally offer support to both the animal and its owner experiencing homelessness. With a door opened, the outreach staff can work with animal welfare organizations to get care for the animal and connect the owner to low-barrier shelter, services, or housing.

These stories remind us that many people consider pets members of their family and will often put their animal’s needs over their own by going without a meal to feed their pets, refilling a pet prescription before their own, or sleeping outside because a shelter won’t allow animals. But by engaging that individual in their primary concern — their pet — homelessness response systems and individual providers can leverage the human-animal bond to provide life-saving services to people and their pets.

Partnering With Animal Welfare Organizations to Help People and Their Pets

In order to serve people experiencing homelessness and their animals, homeless response systems and individual homeless providers must develop and maintain relationships with animal welfare organizations and local veterinarians. Animal welfare organizations and veterinarians are critical partners to increasing opportunities to engage those experiencing a housing crisis. They can assist in the following ways:

- Providing care and vaccination services for animals.
- Donating pet food.
- Donating crates, leashes, toys, beds, etc., for use in shelters or homes.
- Providing shelter or foster care for individuals who may need to separate from their pet while they receive services.
- Providing consultation and training for shelters and homeless providers on how to configure shelters or space so that humans and animals can stay together.
- Providing animal-behavior training to pet owners and homeless provider staff.

The homeless response system cannot do it alone. The stronger these partnerships are, the more resources and opportunities homeless services staff will have to increase engagement.

Adopting a Low-Barrier Approach to Provide Shelter for People with Animals

To serve the entire homeless population with safe shelter while working on a person's plan for permanent housing, communities must ensure that the homeless response system is low-barrier. That includes accommodating animals. Many people resist shelters either because their pet is not allowed inside or because the shelter has no plan to care for the animal while in shelter. The system must have a shelter or plan to manage these accommodations.

Many shelters currently accommodate service animals in order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. More have started to accommodate emotional support animals through reasonable accommodation requests. Through these requirements and experiences, shelters have learned that the benefits of allowing pets outweigh the risks. The fears or apprehensions have not materialized, and, more importantly, the mental and physical health of shelter guests has improved. Shelter staff witness less anxiety and reduced loneliness — which can ease the process of working on a housing plan.

Communities implementing diversion strategies also have opportunities to serve people with animals. Diversion is a strategy that helps people identify and access alternatives to entering emergency shelter to resolve their immediate housing crisis and avoid homelessness. Diversion staff need to build trust and rapport quickly so that they can effectively problem solve with households seeking shelter. One way to do this is to ask whether the household has any pets, if the pets have any needs, and then work to connect the owner with organizations that can assist. In some cases, pets may be the reason that an individual's housing situation has become unstable, so it is critical to address the needs of an animal to help a household avoid homelessness