

Pet shelter removes a barrier to leaving domestic abuse

Stephanie Dickrell and Kirsti Marohn, USA TODAY Published 6:21 p.m. ET Feb. 24, 2015



(Photo: Kimm Anderson, St. Cloud (Minn.) Times)

ST. CLOUD, Minn. — Animal lovers know that pets are family, so the prospect of leaving one behind to flee ([/story/news/local/2015/01/21/pet-shelter-removes-barrier-leaving-abuse/22123975/](http://story/news/local/2015/01/21/pet-shelter-removes-barrier-leaving-abuse/22123975/)) an abusive situation can be agonizing.

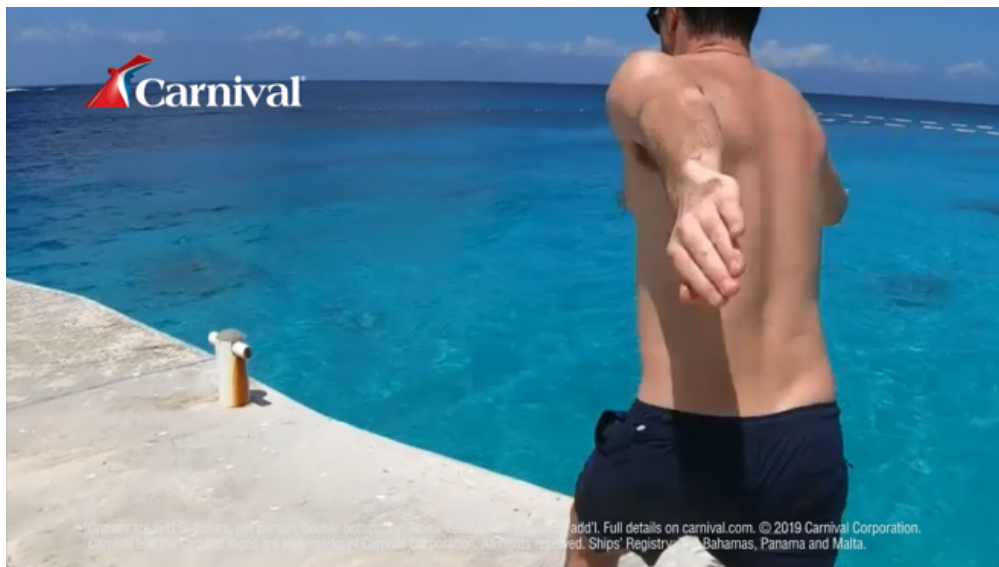
It's a problem so common studies say that 15% to 48% of battered women delay leaving abusive situations, or return to them, out of fear for their animals.

That's exactly the barrier that Anna Marie's Alliance (<http://www.annamaries.org/>) hopes to bring down in St. Cloud. Staff opened a pet shelter in December that can house a family's animals while they stay with the organization that provides a safe place for families experiencing domestic violence.

"It's one less thing to stress about during a stressful situation," said Charles Hempeck, executive director of Anna Marie's.

Margaret Bushinger, an advocate at the shelter, said she witnessed a family at the shelter with a little boy who worried that his dad would kill his dog if he got mad. Soon after that, she started a pet foster care program, a predecessor to the shelter.

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That program placed animals with volunteers, but it meant families and animals were separated. The new shelter means pets stay connected with their families and helps reduce stress and anxiety of the human family members as well.

The shelter cost almost \$116,000 to build, with six connected cages for cats and individual dog kennels, each with a door direct to an outside pen.

It also has an area for families to interact with their pets, play and watch movies. It comes complete with a donated television and pet-themed movies including *Lassie*, *Beethoven* and *All Dogs Go to Heaven*.



The new Anna Marie's Alliance pet shelter offers women escaping abusive relationships a way to keep their pets with them. (Photo: Kimm Anderson, St. Cloud (Minn.) Times)

Staff also know that children who are in a house with domestic violence and trauma can turn to violence against animals. The learning center allows children at Anna Marie's to interact with animals in a healing way, Hempeck said.

More than 70% of battered women report that abusers hurt, killed or threatened their pets to control them and their children. That's according to the [National Link Coalition \(http://nationallinkcoalition.org/\)](http://nationallinkcoalition.org/), an organization that looks at the connection between animal abuse and other problems in the home including child maltreatment, domestic violence and elder abuse.

There's a movement around the country to make these considerations more common. Anna Marie's received funding for its project from [RedRover \(http://www.redrover.org/\)](http://www.redrover.org/), a California-based non-profit that helps build on-site pet shelters for domestic violence victims around the country.

"Over the years, there's definitely been a lot more awareness about how important this is and how many victims will delay or postpone leaving if there is nowhere else for their pets to go," said Esperanza Zuniga, program manager at RedRover.

The first year, 2012, the organization gave away a total of \$10,000. Last year, it gave \$39,000, and hopes to help build a shelter in every state.

"We've seen a lot of really creative pet shelters put together," Zuniga said. "It's just really taken off."

Other programs rely on volunteer foster families to take in pets. Some examples:

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• The [Nebraska Humane Society's Project Pet Safe \(http://www.nehumanesociety.org/site/PageServer?pagename=programs_Project_Pet_Safe\)](http://www.nehumanesociety.org/site/PageServer?pagename=programs_Project_Pet_Safe) arranges for temporary housing for the pets of domestic violence victims, usually with foster families. The program has found temporary homes for dogs, cats, parakeets, guinea pigs and hamsters, said Pam Wiese, shelter spokeswoman.

"They know that the pet is safe, so they can concentrate on getting themselves into a situation where they can be reunited with the pet," Wiese said.

• PAWS Chicago (<http://www.pawschicago.org/>) finds foster homes for the pets of domestic violence victims — at least 15-20 a year, sometimes more — in the Chicago area until they are in a safe situation, said Paula Fasseas, founder and CEO.

"We do everything we can to prevent animals from being relinquished," she said.

Dickrell and Marohn also report for the *St. Cloud (Minn.) Times*

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