

The Columbus Dispatch

Domestic violence victims can now bring pets to Choices shelter

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Residents of a shelter for those fleeing domestic violence no longer have to live apart from their pets when they leave an abusive partner. The Choices for Domestic Violence Victims' new facility has kennel space for dogs, cats and other small animals staffed by Columbus Humane employees.

She knew she had to escape her abusive boyfriend.

But after she dropped off her beloved pit bull puppy at [Columbus Humane](#) and moved into a domestic violence shelter, the central Ohio woman felt guilty and lonely. Sometimes she second-guessed her decision.

Similar doubts are why some women in violent situations never leave.

For 13 years, Columbus Humane has temporarily cared for pets through a free program called Safe Haven for Pets, giving victims time to find help and new homes.

But now residents of [Choices for Domestic Violence Victims](#), a shelter operated by Lutheran Social Services, no longer have to live apart from their pets. Their facility, which opened this year, has a space featuring kennels for dogs, cats and other tiny critters that's staffed by Columbus Humane employees. It started accepting pets in July.

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One such pet is the woman's chestnut-red pit bull, which spent a recent morning excitedly licking peanut butter out of a plastic chew toy. The pair enjoyed the sunshine in a fenced-in yard outside the shelter.

"I was so excited, I jumped up and ran down to see her right away," the woman said, recalling the day her pup moved in and she awoke to the news. The Dispatch isn't using her name because her safety remains a concern.

"I'm so full of joy now that she's here," she said of her puppy. "She lifts me up. I always feel better when we come out and play."

Choices is believed to be one of just a handful of domestic violence shelters in Ohio that accommodate pets. Others are in Athens, Coshocton, Mount Vernon and New Philadelphia, according to Michigan-based Sheltering Animals & Families Together, a program that helps set up and support such facilities. Turning Point, a Marion-based nonprofit, opened a shelter in Delaware County earlier this year that also accepts pets.

Just 3% of the fewer than 3,000 shelters across the country accept pets, experts say, despite research showing that many victims are scared to leave a pet behind because they fear that an abuser will harm or kill it. Some abusers use pets as leverage to get victims to stay, or they hurt pets to exert control.

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence cites a study that found that 71% of victims said their abuser threatened, harmed or killed their pet. Additionally, 48% of victims said they delayed leaving a dangerous situation rather than escape without their pet.

Sue Villilo, the assistant vice president of community-based services for Lutheran Social Services, hopes the new shelter's unique partnership will eliminate a barrier for central Ohio residents who need help. Victims who have called the shelter hotline in the past have asked whether their pets can be accommodated, she said.

"For many people, having a pet here while you're here is very therapeutic," Villilo said.

The 47,000-square-foot, \$18.5 million facility, which is the only domestic violence shelter in Franklin County, has 120 beds in private bedrooms. Its capacity is more than double that of the previous shelter, which was dated, worn out and desperately overcrowded. Nobody in danger is turned away, Villilo said.

The shelter's location isn't made public to keep residents safe.

The pet area has four dog kennels and eight cat kennels and was designed with input from Columbus Humane to keep pets comfortable and prevent the spread of disease. It's separate from the human living space, so residents who are allergic to pets or don't enjoy their company aren't disturbed.

For eight hours a day, Columbus Humane employees care for the animals and coordinate visits with the owners, either in bonding rooms or outside. Veterinarians at the Northwest Side nonprofit group near Hilliard also are able to provide free health care if needed.

Rachel Finney, Columbus Humane's CEO, said of the shelter's addition of kennels, "This could be a shot for someone to finally get out of a dangerous situation. It's a lifesaving opportunity, and not just for the animal who's impacted."

Safe Haven for Pets will still operate at Columbus Humane for victims who aren't living at Choices but might be in other temporary situations, such as living with friends or family, Finney said.

If Choices fills its kennels, Safe Haven for Pets will be an overflow option, she said.

Ruth Glenn, CEO of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, said there's a growing awareness of the lack of accommodations for pets in shelters.

For example, a seven-story apartment complex that opened in New York City last year with support from pet food company Purina allows domestic violence victims and their pets to live together in the same units.

The federal Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, or "Farm Bill," included a provision that established grants for domestic violence shelters to create housing programs for victims with pets as well as emotional support animals and service animals or horses. Other nonprofit groups, such as Red Rover, based in Sacramento, California, offer similar Safe Housing and Safe Escape grants to victims who are temporarily boarding pets.

Still, much progress can be made, Glenn said.

"For many survivors, at some point it becomes 'my life or the pet's life,'" Glenn said. "That's a really sad decision to have to make."

If you are experiencing domestic violence, or someone you know is, call Choices' 24-hour crisis line at 614-224-4463.

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