



Some domestic-abuse victims stay in terrible situations because leaving their best friends behind is unthinkable.

Safe and Together

Pet-friendly domestic violence shelters offer a lifeline to survivors and their dogs.

By Jen Reeder

Sometimes, when her husband grew violent, “Julia” would run out the front door to escape. But then her cellphone would start ringing.

“He would threaten me that if I didn’t come back immediately, he was going to harm the pets,” she says. “So it is a tough situation where once you finally muster the courage to get out, then you’re thinking, ‘You know what? I’m safe, but

what about the dogs? I have to stay so that I can keep watch over them.’ ”

Realizing her dogs wouldn’t be safe for long, Julia worked to find rescue groups that could take them in. But time was against her and the last dog, a Havanese named Frederick.

“It got to the point where if he stayed another day, the dog was going to be dead,” she says. “When you’re in an abuse situation, you stop putting yourself first. And

when you have that pet, even if you can’t look after yourself, I think you try so hard to look after them that it falls into place—by association, you look out for yourself.”

Julia and Frederick got out and found shelter at PeaceWorks Inc., a domestic violence shelter that—unusually—allows pets. While hiding out of state as an animal shelter fostered Frederick, Julia called about 30 different facilities before

finding one where they could stay together.

She credits being able to stay with Frederick as the reason why she did not go back, despite more calls and threats from her ex.

“I knew if I went back, then he would kill the dog,” she says. “I wasn’t looking out for me. I was not at the point where I could think that straight. But having the dog back, I knew: I have to do everything in my power to protect him and to keep

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Off-leash dog parks with agility equipment give pets and their owners a chance to unwind. Having fun in a safe environment can play an important role in healing.

him safe and not have to relinquish him again.”

A year later, they both have some lingering trauma but ultimately are thriving as they move into a new phase of life—safe and together.

“Frederick is doing great. He’s happy that he’s got his mom back,” she says.

Pet Project

Since its founding in 1986, the Colorado non-profit PeaceWorks Inc. has



Having a ball at a dog park maintained by URI's PALS program.



Things are looking up for these hopeful little souls in a PeaceWorks shelter.

Support Available from the AKC Humane Fund

The AKC Humane Fund awards grants to a variety of pet-related organizations, including domestic violence shelters that allow pets—or would like to.

“We want people to be able to have a safe haven where their pets can be safe and they can be safe,” says Brandi Hunter Munden, vice president of public relations and communications at the American Kennel Club.

So the organization helps domestic violence shelters purchase supplies like crates and bedding to help them start sheltering dogs as well as other pets.

“We’re accepting applications all year long and we try to process them as quickly as possible,” she says. “We want people to have their comfort—their best friend—with them, so we will continue to do this work.”

For more information or to apply for a grant, visit the AKC Humane Fund at akchumanefund.org.

opened its doors to survivors of domestic violence and their pets like Julia and Frederick. Through its Safe Pets program, the group has welcomed a variety of dog breeds as well as cats, reptiles, rabbits, and pocket pets. It even arranges foster care for farm animals, including two llamas.

“We don’t want a pet to be a barrier for someone seeking safety and seeking support for the violence that they’re experiencing in their lives,” says Eileen Krenzel Rojas, outreach coordinator for PeaceWorks.

Abusers will sometimes restrict medical care for both humans and pets in the household, so PeaceWorks arranges for veterinary treatment and vaccinations. The group helps with emotional healing by playing soothing music and providing comfortable dog beds, blankets, and anxiety vests while pets recover.

People who call the crisis

hotline can discuss safety planning for themselves and their pets, according to Lori Cuno, executive director. A nurse recently reached out to PeaceWorks for shelter for herself, two small children, and their puppy. She’d stayed because her husband had never been abusive to the children, but when she brought the

puppy home, he started kicking the puppy.

“It just clicked for her: ‘If he can do that to a puppy that I and the children love, he’s very capable of doing that to my children—not just me,’” she says.

“That’s when she called.”

Numerous studies have found intersections of animal and family violence, according to psychologist Mary Lou Randour, Ph.D., senior advisor for the



A colorful mural by artist Elijah Minton brightens the dog park at a Harmony House domestic violence shelter.

TOP: COURTESY OF PEACEWORKS INC.; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF URI



Animals and Family Violence program at the nonprofit Animal Welfare Institute (AWI).

“Animal abuse often occurs in the same household with domestic violence and child abuse,” she says.

Studies have also found a correlation between the severity of domestic violence

and animal abuse. Around half of domestic violence survivors delay leaving a dangerous situation because they don’t know how to keep their pets safe, she says.

So AWI maintains an online directory of around 1,200 safe havens across America—searchable by

ZIP code—that work to help pets of people fleeing domestic violence. Those that allow co-sheltering, like PeaceWorks, are less common than those that partner with local animal shelters and veterinary hospitals to provide temporary foster care.

Learning to Heal

Randour would like to see more domestic violence shelters allow pets to stay with their people—for the good of both the animals and the survivors.

“As we all know, the bonds between a person and their pet often are very strong, so being able to maintain that bond for the domestic violence survivor and the pet is healing,” she says. “It promotes recovery for both.”

Research supports that assertion. Last year, a national survey by the New York City–based nonprofit Urban Resource Institute (URI) and the National Domestic Violence Hotline found 91 percent of survivors said their pets’ emotional support and physical protection are significant in their ability to survive and heal.

Additionally, 97 percent said pets are an important factor in deciding whether to seek shelter.

Danielle Emery, director of URI’s People and Animals Living Safely (PALS) program, gets to know survivors and their pets quite well since the average stay in the nonprofit’s

pet-friendly shelters is six months. She’s seen dogs help children heal from their traumatic experiences while living together.

It can also be empowering for survivors to help their pets recover from the stress of living in an abusive environment. A Chihuahua named Daisy became fearful of new people during her ordeal, but the staff frequently visited Daisy and her owner while offering the little dog treats and speaking softly. Eventually the dog was so comfortable that she jumped onto Emery’s lap—a special moment.

Another dog overcame separation anxiety, which filled her person with pride.

“We’re trying to look at them as an entire family unit and address all of the needs that they have,” Emery says.

To that end, some URI shelters like Harmony House even have adjoining off-leash dog parks with agility equipment, which is fun for the dogs and offers peace of mind to survivors who might feel uneasy walking their dog alone at night.

“We all deserve the companionship and love that our animals give to us,” she says. “Especially when we’re in moments of crisis.” **FD**

Jen Reeder narrowed her focus as a journalist to pets over a decade ago thanks to her Lab, Rio. She is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

Reach Out

If you or someone you love is in danger, please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or visit thehotline.org.

To find out if domestic violence shelters in your ZIP code offer accommodations for pets (or if not, how to start a program), visit safehavensforpets.org.

Resources:

- PeaceWorks: 24/7 crisis assistance (voice and text hotline): 303-838-8181, peaceworksinc.co
- Urban Resource Institute (URI): urinyc.org
- Animal Welfare Institute: awionline.org