

Pet-Friendly Shelters: 10 Lessons From The Field

1. In one community, research shows that 5.5% of people experiencing homelessness reported caretaking for an animal¹. This includes those fleeing from domestic violence and animal abuse. Many in this population do not enter shelter because the shelter does not accept their animals.
2. A shelter accepting federal dollars has to comply with the American Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Fair Housing Act. The ADA requires that guide or service dogs be allowed entry into public buildings and public-access areas and the Fair Housing Act allows people with disabilities to request accommodations for assistance and emotional support animals. This means that shelters receiving federal financial assistance are required to accept service and emotional support animals.
3. Once a shelter accepts an animal it's legally obligated to accept, the transition to accepting all pets is easier. Because of the preparation, the infrastructure, protocols, and staff are better prepared to accept pets as well.
4. The preferred way to co-shelter people and their animals is for the animals to sleep in the same room as their owners. This decreases negative animal behaviors and increases the opportunity for therapeutic contact. If this is not possible, pets may also be housed in an indoor or outdoor kennel as appropriate. Keeping pets and animals on the same property helps maintain the human-animal bond and the therapeutic benefit of the animal.
5. Rules for animals, as for people, should be based on behavior. If an animal is acting aggressively, shelter staff can assess the situation to determine if resources can be provided to resolve the situation or if other arrangements should be made for sheltering the animal.
6. Shelter staff should be trained on the ADA and Fair Housing Act to assist clients with reasonable accommodation requests. They should also be trained on how to approach animals in a non-threatening manner, how to build relationships with animals, what the responsibilities of owners are and how to handle situations when the responsibilities are not being met.
7. Shelters can protect other residents who have allergies or fears of animals by adding a few simple questions at intake and strategically placing people and their animals in specific areas.
8. A key goal of low-barrier shelter is to quickly provide emergency shelter. Instead of requiring that animals meet several specifications like being vaccinated, being licensed, or being spayed/neutered before entering shelter, shelter staff can eliminate those barriers and help the animals and their caretakers work towards these goals once they are sleeping inside.
9. Partnerships are crucial in becoming a low-barrier shelter. Shelters can receive pet supply donations from food banks, pet stores, and from donors selecting items from an in-kind donation wish list. Shelters can also apply for grants and targeted donations to purchase items or procure gift cards for pet supplies. Shelters and associated

¹ Cronley, C., Strand, E. B., Patterson, D. A., & Gwaltney, S. (2009). Homeless People who are Animal Caretakers: A Comparative Study. *Psychological Reports*, 105(2), 481-499. doi:10.2466/pr0.105.2.481-499 and <https://www.petsofthehomeless.org/about-us/faqs/>

outreach teams can also partner with their local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), Humane Society, and/or veterinarian to assist with vaccines, spay/neutering services, flea medication, and general animal behavior and protocol concerns.

10. Shelters should take extra steps to ensure that they are addressing the extra barriers that animal owners face when moving to permanent housing. Staff should assist the client in obtaining documentation or legal assistance to show that their animal is a service or emotional support animal if applicable and then collaborate with landlords to encourage them to accept the animal according to the law. If possible, shelters should have access to a flexible fund to assist with pet deposits and other extra fees related to the animals.