

More Domestic Violence Shelters Take Pets. Philanthropy Helped Make That Happen — Inside Philanthropy

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Over the last decade-plus, dozens upon dozens of domestic violence shelters across the nation have updated their facilities to ensure they never have to turn away anyone seeking shelter with a pet. Today, as domestic violence concerns flare amid COVID-19, such shelters exist in all but four states. Working alongside activists and nonprofits, philanthropy has played a critical role in bringing about this transformation.

Just four domestic violence shelters in the United States [were known to host pets](#) on site with families in 2008, according to Sheltering Animals and Families Together (SAF-T), one of the key groups in this expansion. Today, there are an estimated 238 shelters that can accommodate victims and animals, or about 17% of all emergency domestic violence shelters in the United States, based on recent surveys by [RedRover](#), an animal welfare nonprofit that, in partnership with SAF-T, has also been

key to the expansion.

Philanthropy was “very much in the forefront of providing financial resources and other resources to providers like the Urban Resource Institute” to provide such accommodations, said Nathaniel Fields, the organization’s president and CEO.

A Surprisingly Important Need

Fields led the [launch](#) of the first pet-friendly domestic violence shelter in New York City in 2013 with support from A Kinder World Foundation. He was moved by the need he saw.

Research has shown nearly half of domestic violence victims delay leaving their abusers because they do not want to leave a pet behind, and roughly two-thirds of American families have pets.

But government resistance to the idea of a pet-friendly shelter made paying for the project difficult. “Funding was tough,” Fields told me. “A Kinder World was in it from the beginning.”

The institute, which is the largest domestic violence shelter provider in the country, now has 172 apartments that accommodate pets. Government funding remains their largest source of support, but philanthropy was catalytic and remains a key support. Grants from the charitable arms of the retailer PetSmart and animal hospital chain Banfield have also helped them expand their pet-friendly accommodations.

“I think the animal welfare community saw the need sooner than we did in terms of the domestic violence community. They had been at this quite some time,” Fields told me, noting that the

complexity of running a domestic violence shelter, along with their typically limited funding, made it hard for most to launch new initiatives. “The funders came along sooner on the animal welfare side, too.”

Kathleen Savesky Buckley, a philanthropic advisor with A Kinder World Foundation and past president of the affinity group Animal Grantmakers, traces the funding community’s engagement on this issue to studies that began emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s of the link between violence to animals and violence to humans.

“Animal welfare foundations were much more concerned with animals. That started changing again with the research that was done to show all the connections,” she told me. “We started to see it as something we had an obligation to address.”

Known among advocates simply as “the link,” the connection between animal abuse and human violence—which includes not just domestic violence, but also issues like child and elder abuse—is a driving force both for activists and funders in this space. Advocates have long been connected by an informal network, the [National Link Coalition](#), which has long tracked developments, including funding, in the space.

Who is Funding Domestic Violence Shelters That Accept Pets?

Corporate foundations and giving programs comprise a primary philanthropic source of support for shelters accommodating victims’ animals. For instance, Bayer, the pharmaceutical

multinational, whose products include animal medication, has provided funding to launch and maintain co-sheltering facilities in states including Missouri, New York and Nevada dating back to [at least 2012](#).

Most recently, Bayer partnered with the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence to [provide](#) \$100,000 to shelters that serve survivors with pets to mitigate the additional strains of COVID-19. It also has an ongoing program, Grants Fur Families, that supports shelters for families with pets facing domestic violence. Purina and Banfield maintain similar programs.

Smaller private foundations like A Kinder World Foundation have also played important roles in the expansion, particularly at the state and local level. For instance, the Kirkpatrick Foundation funded the first domestic violence shelter in Oklahoma to accept domestic violence victims with their pets. Similarly, the Kenneth Scott Charitable Trust has long funded work in this area, mostly in Ohio. It has also supported training workshops by the [National Link Coalition](#), according to the group's coordinator, Phil Arkow.

One of the key conduits for philanthropic support of this expansion is actually a nonprofit: RedRover. In 2012, the organization launched a grant program to help shelters adding facilities for pets, eventually offering grants of \$3,000, funded largely by donations. A few years later, a [grant](#) from the Trustees of the William H. Donner Foundation allowed them to

double that amount.

Then, in August 2017, an anonymous foundation supercharged the effort. This funder, which still supports them today, [provided](#) RedRover the funding to give up to \$20,000 to each shelter and hire a dedicated staff member to conduct outreach and serve as a liaison to partners. The organization started issuing as many as two dozen domestic violence shelter grants a year.

“The barriers of what stopped the domestic violence shelters from doing this really came down,” said Nicole Forsyth, the organization’s president and CEO.

Last year, things got even bigger. RedRover [partnered](#) with Purina, the pet food and products company, which will give \$500,000 over four years to help even more shelters accept pets. Known as the Purple Leash project, the partnership with Purina, whose work at this intersection Inside Philanthropy first [covered](#) several years ago, has also brought in more individual donors.

Over the course of its programs, RedRover has [given](#) more than \$1,000,000 in grants to more than 110 shelters. It’s now considering a new goal: ensuring 25% of shelters in each state accept animals. “We may not be able to remove all the barriers, but we can remove this barrier,” Forsyth told me. “It’s just a very simple solution.”

Allie Phillips, whose experience as a prosecutor led her to launch SAF-T, a pioneer in making shelters pet-friendly, is hoping to expand services to underserved communities. She

was recently on a webinar with the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center. Nearly 800 people joined the call. "There is not one pet-friendly tribal domestic violence center," she said. "We're going to change that."

The Katrina Effect and COVID-19

Animal activists for years tried to convince the Red Cross and other relief organizations to allow people to take their pets to shelters during evacuations. Repeatedly, Buckley told me, they got the same answer: That's the work of animal shelters. Then Hurricane Katrina hit.

"When they saw that people were willing to die rather than abandon their pets, all of that changed," she said.

With millions out of work due to COVID-19's disruptions, many pet owners can no longer afford to care for their animals and are turning to animal organizations for support. Meanwhile, the pandemic's effects—job losses, shelter-in-place orders—are increasing the risk of domestic violence. The pandemic arrived as the animal welfare movement was already increasingly prioritizing ways to keep animals with their owners. Buckley imagines the pandemic, like Katrina, could heighten awareness of the importance of that bond.

"I'm hopeful that COVID is going to be a huge piece of helping more people recognize we can't care for animals if we can't care for the people who care for animals," she said.