

PAWS Program Keeps Women, Pets Together

American Humane highlights shelter program during Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Posted: October 28, 2009, 3 a.m. EDT

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month and to mark the event the American Humane Association has been calling attention to its Pets and Women's Shelters (PAWS) Program.

The PAWS Program, launched in February 2008, is the first national initiative to promote on-site housing of pets at family-violence shelters in order to maintain the human-animal bond, which can be crucial to recovery after a crisis. When the PAWS Program began, American Humane was aware of only four domestic-violence shelters that provided on-site housing for pets. Now there are 28 such shelters, with seven more in the process of conversion.

According to American Humane, between 71 percent and 85 percent of women entering domestic-violence shelters reported that a partner had threatened, injured or killed the family pet, according to a 1997 study. The organization also cited a 2007 study that showed up to 48 percent of women either delay leaving an abusive home or remain in the home out of fear for their pets' safety if they were to leave them behind. Often, because of few options for safely housing pets from abusive homes, victims feel they have little choice but to stay and subject themselves, their children and their pets to further violence.

According to American Humane, the PAWS Program acknowledges the link between human violence and animal cruelty, but it also recognizes the healing bond pets can provide to people who have endured trauma. American Humane encourages all domestic and family violence shelters across the country to take the necessary steps toward implementing a PAWS Program at their facilities. Recently, the organization published a PAWS Program Startup Guide to help shelters assess their needs and to provide step-by-step instructions for implementing the program. American Humane also provides free technical assistance and guidance to implement PAWS. Materials are available at their website.