



DOMESTIC VIOLENCEand Pet Abuse.....

About half of all domestic violence victims don't flee abusive situations because they don't want to leave a pet behind. Yet, only around three percent of domestic violence shelters in the U.S. have any tolerance for allowing pets.

That's all about to change. This fall, a seven-story domestic violence shelter designed for ALL domestic violence survivors, including family members with four legs, called PALS (People and Animals Living Safely) Place will open in Brooklyn. There will be 30 pet-friendly apartments—the first facility of its kind in the U.S. (Figures 1 and 2).

Dr. Kurt Venator, chief medical officer at Purina, calls it “a game changer and a life saver.” He's referring to both human and animal lives.

When domestic violence occurs, it's not news that the abuser often begins by practicing on pets and continues to abuse animals. Human and animal lives really are at risk. No one knows how many animals die as a result of domestic violence, but we do know that about 70 percent of victims report that at least one pet has been harmed in their abuse situation—and veterinarians are now paying attention.

“Veterinary professionals can be on the front lines for this,” says veterinary forensics pioneer Dr. Melinda Merck, author *Veterinary Forensics: Animal Cruelty Investigations*, 2nd Edition and co-author of *Veterinary Forensic Investigation of Animal Cruelty: A Guide for Veterinarians and Law Enforcement*. “Of course, there may be physical signs of animal abuse,” says Merck, “but also think about hidden injuries like rib fractures. Another sign not always thought about could be behavior issues,” Merck says.

“It's very important for veterinarians to think about the possibility of domestic

violence,” adds Merck. “I am sure we could identify abuse, at least as a possibility, more often if we simply thought about it,” says Merck. “Sometimes domestic violence is suspected but veterinarians may not want to get involved in domestic issues. Arguably, getting involved and speaking out for animals is consistent with the veterinary oath.”

Merck says her protocol is to look at cats even more closely than dogs as victims. “They're smaller, and easier to abuse. Their injuries may be more severe, and may not be consistent with what the owner is suggesting. Cats also tend to not be as forgiving as dogs, and that can escalate a negative attitude about the cat to the offender.”

“All veterinary professionals can play an important role in identifying and reporting abuse,” Merck says. Of course, that includes veterinary nurses—who clients may be more open with than the veterinarian, who may be perceived as more an authority figure.

But, Dr. Marta Sanchez-Emden of Miami, Florida, says, “It's not so easy to report—depending on where you live.” Dr. Sanchez-Emden was herself a victim of abuse earlier in her life. She agrees that domestic violence is likely underreported, and veterinary professionals are a surprisingly important cog in the wheel.

Hope Dawson of New York City has been



Figure 1 (top): A room at PALS Place

Figure 2 (bottom): Purina Pet Haven at PALS Place

there (Figure 3). “We wanted to keep our family together,” she says. “Even if a loving home was found for our dog Coco, it wasn't our home. And at that point my kids so much needed Coco, and I did too. But there was nowhere to go with Coco.”

Hope did ultimately find refuge at Urban Resource Institute (URI). PALS Place will be a part of URI, the largest

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Figure 3 (left): Hope Dawson and Coco; Figure 4 (right): Dr. Kurt Venator with Nathaniel Fields

provider of domestic violence services in America. Currently, URI does make some space available for people and pets in their existing facilities.

“While it’s great that we provide pet friendly spaces, far more than most cities; there’s clearly an overwhelming need and our goal is move toward meeting that demand,” says Nathaniel M. Fields, president and CEO of URI and Center Against Domestic Violence.

Human Animal Bond Research Initiative (HABRI), Purina, Bayer Corporation, Pet Partners (the nation’s largest nonprofit registering handlers of animal-assisted interventions), Noah’s Animal House and URI have formed a coalition to support the passage of the Pet and Women Safety (PAWS) Act (H.R. 909, S.322), a bill that is adamant about removing a roadblock that is essential to the safety of these survivors with pets by enabling them to live healthy, safe lives, together with the entire family (Figure 4).

Noah’s Animal House and URI are just a couple of the few domestic violence shelters across the country who are working to keep both pets and family members away from the dangers of domestic abuse. Together these two incredible organizations have saved more than 1,500 pets from abusive conditions, so that no domestic violence survivor is forced to choose between staying in an abusive relationship and leaving their pet with their abuser or an animal shelter.

“When fleeing domestic violence, victims often leave with the clothes they’re wearing and little more,” says Fields. “Having a family pet—especially when there are children involved—brings something with them that offers continuity and stability. And let’s not ignore pets’ ability to help us to feel better, and even to heal,” Venator adds.

PALS Place won’t only be a building that allows pets—the building itself is being created with pets in mind. They will offer more than just cute boxes filled with toys. They will provide pet food, pet treats, a

dog and/or cat crate, cat litter, litter boxes, leashes and collars to all of the dogs and cats. From the ground up, they will take everything regarding pets and people living better together into consideration, from the flooring to consulting our experts on color palates. PALS Place will employ over 30 administrative, clinical, and operations staff trained to create a healing environment that helps adults, children, and pets recover from trauma and abuse and prepare for independent living. Staff will also provide housing assistance to help clients search for safe, permanent homes that accommodate pets as they transition out of shelter. The hope is that PALS Place will be a model which others around the country will follow. Clearly, veterinary nurses continuing to further their outreach into the community offering expertise and support for victims, may be an important service. **J**

SOURCES:

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ABOUT STEVE DALE

Steve Dale, Certified Animal Behavior Consultant (CABC), moderated the panel discussion of national experts in the domestic violence and animal welfare spaces in New York to announce PALS Place. Dale is host of three pet radio shows, and contributing author of “Decoding Your Dog,” authored by American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. He’s on the Board of Directors of the Winn Feline Foundation and Human Animal Bond Association. He speaks at veterinary and animal welfare conferences around the world. His website is www.stevedale.tv.

