

Paws for Safety Story

CURATED AND WRITTEN BY JESSICA WAHLSTROM

If you or someone you know is a victim or survivor and needs help, please reach out to us, we are here 24-hours a day.

The dog follows the sun throughout the day to wherever it makes its way into the house, illuminating a room, or part of it. The sunlight, filtered through a paned window, warms his coat. Shadows of the grid from the glass panels are cast onto his little body. Sometimes, above and around him, dust plays in the light, landing where he lies. He occasionally sighs. There are times, especially times that feel hard, when I watch him and I take his lead: move to find the light, breathe, rest.



One night in 2011, a woman called Center for Safety & Change from her car, looking for somewhere to rest. She had been beaten by her husband and needed to find a place where she could address her injuries and shelter. Her beloved dog was in the seat next to her and she had no place

to bring him. Very few shelters allow victims seeking assistance to bring their pets with them because they are unable to accommodate animals. They drove around for hours — the woman and her dog, her companion — trying to figure out where they could land for the night.

We are driven to keep the people and things that we love safe. Leaving an abusive situation is almost always extremely complicated. Victims of violence will often not leave their abuser unless every being in their household can get out safely with them. Violence against animals is a key predictor of other forms of violence. Threats and acts of cruelty against pets are common and deter victims of violence from seeking help. Many victims who own pets report returning to their abuser in an effort to keep their pets safe. Data suggests that a majority of pet-owning victims seeking emergency shelter services report that their abuser had injured, maimed, killed, or threatened their pet in an attempt to control or hurt them.

Within months of receiving the call from the woman who was driving around with her dog looking for shelter, Center for Safety & Change launched Paws for Safety, a program that — in partnership with the Hudson Valley Humane Society (HVHS) — provides a safe, temporary home for the pets of victims of violence. While victims aren't able to see their pets while they are housed elsewhere, they receive regular updates. They feel the relief that comes with knowing that their beloved animals are safe while they are apart. The goal of the program is to reunite the pets with their owners as soon as it is possible. This can sometimes take several months. The demand for temporary housing through the Paws for Safety Program has increased in recent years. The costs of caring for the animals for extended periods of time, addressing daily and often complicated medical needs, is very expensive. The Center and HVHS are working hard to identify the resources needed to expand and meet the needs of those who want to protect their pets while they themselves seek safety and plan for what is next.



Pets have an uncanny way of finding their way back to places they know, to the people who are their home. They remember us, miss us when we are apart, love us and steady us when we are together. Perhaps when animals housed by the Paws for Safety Program are reunited with their owners, they help their companions find their way to what is next. Wherever we land, when we start to settle into our next home by choice or necessity, our beloved pets can lead us to where we need to be: to the rooms — the slivers of space — where the light makes its way in; into the quiet that allows us to hear the steady rhythm of their breath that helps us to regulate our own; to a spot next to them where we can feel the beating of their heart reliably pulsing warm. ▲