



## ESCAPING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AS A PET OWNER

*Insights from survivors of domestic violence  
and recommendations from the  
Urban Resource Institute's URIPALS program*

**URIPALS**<sup>®</sup>  
People and Animals Living Safely

 **URINYC**<sup>®</sup>  
Urban Resource Institute

# INTRODUCTION

In 2012, Urban Resource Institute (URI), an organization that provides individualized, comprehensive programs for domestic violence survivors, recognized that pet owners who were survivors of domestic violence were not being adequately served. Specifically, there were no domestic violence shelters in New York City and few nationally that allowed survivors of domestic violence to bring their pets with them when going into a shelter. As a result, survivors had to face the nearly impossible choice of abandoning their pets or entering shelter. This issue forced many survivors to stay in abusive situations, risking their own lives rather than separating from their pets.

In response, we launched URIPALS (People and Animals Living Safely) in 2013. Today, URIPALS is the only program in New York City and one of the few in the U.S. that allows domestic violence survivors to co-shelter (live in shelter with their pets). From the program’s inception, we have collected data and insights from domestic violence survivors seeking shelter and pet owners who entered URI’s shelter as part of the URIPALS program. The findings have provided insight into the specific challenges faced by pet owners who are survivors of domestic violence and how an organization can successfully build a co-sheltering model that ensures that the entire family, pets included, is able to escape abuse.

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## URIPALS

After realizing the great need for a co-sheltering program, we committed ourselves to figuring out how we could keep families and their pets together when entering a domestic violence shelter.

URIPALS launched as a pilot program in June 2013 in our Brooklyn shelter, Safe Haven. We designated one-third of our shelter apartments as pet-friendly and equipped them with welcome kits comprised of pet supplies and educational materials designed to assist families with the best practices for caring for their pets. At first, the six-month pilot was limited to include just cats and small pets, such as hamsters and fish, but due to the success of the program, URIPALS expanded to also allow dogs weighing up to 45 pounds at Safe Haven.

After dogs were welcomed into Safe Haven, URI partnered with Purina to open New York City's first-ever dog park in a domestic violence shelter. Named the Purina Play Haven, it marked a critical step forward in improving conditions for survivors and their pets to heal together in shelter.

In the summer of 2015, URIPALS expanded to a second URI shelter, the Retreat in Harlem, and in October 2015, we again partnered with Purina to open a new dog park at the Retreat to serve the families and their pets residing in shelter there.

To date, URIPALS has helped 43 families with 63 pets, including 38 cats, 18 dogs, and a range of smaller animals, such as reptiles and fish, escape domestic violence. From the program's inception, we also enlisted the help of the Mayor's Alliance for New York City's Animals and the ASPCA to support families and their pets during their time in shelter. These organizations provided supplies, such as food, litter, and toys, and vital services, including wellness exams, vaccinations, dewormings, microchips, nail clippings, heartworm tests, and spays/neuters at no cost to the families.

Following the initial success of the program and the recent expansion to the Retreat in Harlem, we plan to replicate URIPALS at the other two of our four New York City shelters.

It is our hope that the findings presented in this white paper will raise awareness of the challenges faced by survivors of domestic violence and their pets when seeking to escape abuse, and help organizations develop their own co-sheltering models across the U.S.

## COLLECTING THE DATA

We collected data for the white paper from three primary sources.

- › **URI's Emergency Shelter Hotline:** Between June 2013 and May 2015, we collected responses from 1,266 callers. These callers were assessed before being referred to shelter services and were asked about pet ownership, among other issues.
- › **Resident Satisfaction Surveys:** 260 residents at URI shelters completed surveys between June 2013 and May 2015. The residents who took these surveys included those in the URIPALS program and those not in URIPALS. In total, 408 surveys were completed, but we omitted the data for residents who indicated they had taken the survey previously.
- › **URIPALS Intake Form:** Data was also gathered from 43 URIPALS residents regarding their family size, including pets, and the types of pets entering the program.

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## Actual Calls to the Emergency Shelter Hotline:

“Yes, he kicked and choked the dog. He also threatened to kill the dog.”

“[Caller said] after he abused her, he grabbed her cats by the throat threatening to throw them out the window because he knows she loves her cats.”

“Threatened to throw the cat outside, client tried to protect the cat and the abuser pushed her.”

“Caller stated he would hit her in her head when she tries to protect her pet.”

“Caller stated while covering one of her cats from the abuser, she was slapped.”

“He told my children he was going to kill the cat”

“He would put my cat in the microwave and tie him up with twine if I didn’t come straight home from work.”

“Dog was scared and hid under the table and in cabinets.”

“My dogs were very nervous, anxious, and their eating patterns were affected. My female dog became ill for several months and healed once we arrived in shelter.”

## INSIGHTS FROM PET OWNERS AND SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Studies have shown that when a survivor attempts to leave their abusive partner they are at the greatest risk of being killed or seriously injured (Campbell, 1995; J. Campbell et al., 2003; McFarlane et al., 1999). When a survivor of domestic violence owns a pet, further risks and complications may arise, as abusers frequently use the threat of violence or acts of violence against a pet as a means to control the survivor (Favor & Strand, 2007; Flynn, 2000; Hardesty, Khaw, Ridgway, Weber, & Miles, 2013).

Of pet owners who called URI’s emergency shelter hotline, 30% indicated their pet had been threatened when asked, “Has your abuser threatened to harm your pets?” Abusers target animals as well as their human partners, showing similar patterns of violence toward both pet and owner.

Survivors may face further abuse when they try to protect their pets. Of pet owners who called the hotline, 24% stated they had been threatened when asked, “Has your abuser threatened to hurt you if you protected your pet(s)?” Pets often end up subjected to similar abuse as their owners in domestic violence situations. Naturally, survivors want to protect their pets, who are part of their family and are vital supports for many survivors as they cope with abuse (Flynn, 2000). Of pet owners who called the hotline, 12% stated their abuser hurt them while protecting their pet when asked, “Has your abuser hurt you while you were trying to protect your pet?”

In addition to threatening the survivor when they try to protect a pet, abusers frequently harm a pet directly. According to URI’s resident satisfaction survey, of URI residents who had a pet at any point while in an abusive relationship, 34% said their abusive partner inflicted physical harm on their pets.

We also found a further connection to domestic violence perpetrators and animal abuse. Even in situations where the survivor did not own a pet, survivors often reported that they had seen their abuser hurt animals. 19% of URI residents who completed the resident satisfaction survey reported that they had witnessed their abusive partner threaten an animal. The abusers often followed through on their threats; 17% of URI residents reported that they had witnessed their abuser harm an animal, and 4% reported that they had witnessed their abusive partner kill an animal. These data are consistent with prior research findings that demonstrate the relationship between domestic violence and pet abuse (Ascione & Arkow, 1999; Becker & French, 2004).

Pets are greatly affected by being in abusive homes and may undergo personality or behavioral changes due to the stress of living in a violent home. Many URIPALS program participants said they noticed changes in their pet’s behavior while they were in their abusive situations. Pets are perceptive to when their owners are in danger, and this stress has an impact on them, too.

Faced with these terrible threats and violence towards themselves and their pets, many survivors make the decision to leave. Although some pet owners fleeing domestic violence are able to give their pets to family members or friends, many have nowhere to turn and are faced with the devastating possibility of surrendering their pets. Many survivors and their children rely on the comfort of their beloved pets as they recover from the trauma of domestic violence, making this decision to surrender that more difficult. This is where we identified an important need for co-sheltering services. Of pet owners who called URI’s emergency shelter hotline, 44% indicated they would like assistance in finding a safe place for their pet, and 71% indicated they would like their pet to reside in shelter with them.

This is where URI recognized a gap between the needs of survivors and the resources that are available. URIPALS is the only program in New York City to allow survivors to live with their pets in shelter, and few shelters of this kind are available anywhere in the country. Indeed, many survivors cited the fact that URIPALS welcomes pets as a key factor in their decision to leave their abusive partners. 75% of URIPALS participants agreed or strongly agreed that being allowed to bring their pets to the shelter through the URIPALS program was influential in their decision to leave their abusive homes. If expanding co-sheltering in New York City and the country would increase the likelihood of a domestic violence survivor fleeing her or his abusive partner, this should be a priority for other organizations.

In addition to allowing survivors to leave abusive environments with their pets, the URIPALS program has successfully helped survivors heal while in shelter. Feedback from URIPALS residents concerning the co-sheltering model has been overwhelmingly positive, with 92% of PALS residents saying they were satisfied or very satisfied with the services provided by the program.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING A CO-SHELTERING MODEL

The past two years of experience running URIPALS have provided us with unique insight into the necessary steps and challenges associated with developing a co-sheltering program. A shelter that welcomes pets needs to have special services and supplies tailored to these families. In addition to having clean apartments furnished for people, co-sheltering programs must provide crates for pets, space for larger pets to play outside, and resources for pet health services in addition to those for humans.

Additionally, programs need to take into account special physical and psychological issues associated with living near pets. Many people who hear about co-sheltering models wonder about people who would feel uncomfortable living in a shelter with pets, so our research addressed these concerns. Out of the callers to our emergency shelter hotline, 13% indicated that they or their children are allergic to certain animals.

Also, 11% of callers to the hotline indicated that they or their children have asthma triggered by animals.

We also asked our hotline callers about fear of animals, and 17% of callers indicated that they were scared of certain animals, but of these callers, many of them were scared of animals not allowed in the URIPALS program, such as lions, spiders, and snakes. However, the most common fear was a fear of dogs and large dogs in particular. In part because of this, we made the decision that all dogs will be transported in a carrier or muzzled while walking through common areas. This assists in alleviating some fears and reduces the likelihood of accidental injury should a dog become startled and fearful. But we also saw this as an opportunity for education for all residents. As a result, all residents and their children are given information, and at times training, on how to approach animals safely.

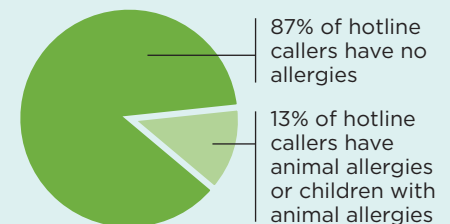
While there remains a minority of the population that is hesitant about living with pets, there are ways to address these issues. Keeping pet-friendly apartments in a separate part of the shelter from standard apartments may decrease the risk of allergies or asthma as well as interactions between pets and people who fear them. Shelters can also employ more extensive or more frequent cleaning to alleviate any potential concerns about the messes associated with pet ownership.

“Being accepted into the program with 2 cats was very instrumental in my decision to leave. My boys are very attached to me and....I wouldn’t want my cats to be depressed, sad and feeling abandoned.”

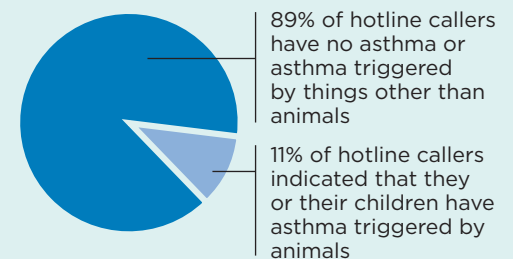
“The support and concern that was demonstrated upon my entrance into the program toward my dogs made me feel comfortable and welcomed.”

### Potential Concerns with Co-Sheltering Models

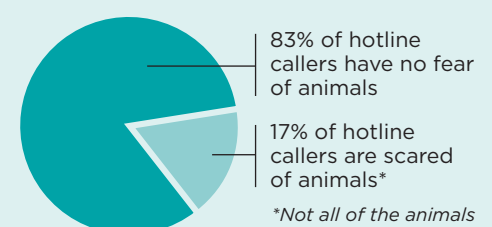
#### Animal Allergies



#### Asthma



#### Fear of Animals

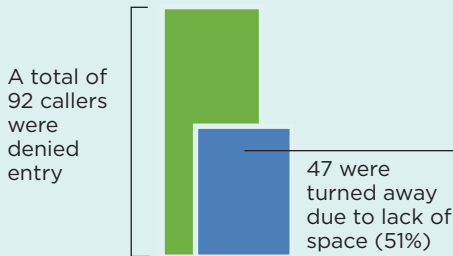


\*Not all of the animals people feared were allowed in URIPALS

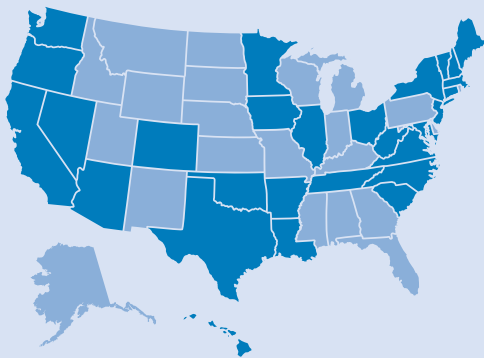
“I didn’t know about this program... I had to give my cat to a relative to take care of.”

“I feel that being able to have a family pet accompany you while in a shelter is wonderful because they are a part of the family too.”

#### Lack of Available Housing



#### States Allowing Inclusion of Pets in Order of Protection



“They calm my anxiety, panic attacks, and depression.”

“Along with feeling safe for yourself you can feel more comfortable knowing your pet would be safe too.”

It is also vital to increase awareness in the communities we serve about the availability of co-sheltering programs. Some URI residents did not know about the URIPALS program and expressed that they would have wanted to keep their pets with them in shelter if they had known about the option. Although we ask all hotline callers if they have a pet, we recognize that some survivors of domestic violence are hesitant to disclose to hotline operators that they have a pet out of fear that they would not be accepted into shelter as a result.

In our experience, we have found that it has been an empowering and therapeutic experience for survivors to share their stories about their pets via the media and social media outlets. We have worked hard to ensure that survivors’ voices are heard and their needs are addressed. These stories have been essential in our effort to increase awareness of the link between domestic violence and animal abuse and have highlighted the need for co-sheltering.

Finally, organizations have to work closely with their government regulatory partners to gain support and approval for co-sheltering programs. URI’s emergency shelters are regulated and funded by the NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). The support of both HRA and OCFS was critical to the development and expansion of URIPALS.

## CURRENT BARRIERS TO SAFETY

### Available Housing

Unfortunately, we don’t have the capacity to help everyone who seeks our services. Out of 92 callers who were denied entry into the URIPALS program upon screening by our URIPALS coordinator, 47 were turned away because of lack of space. As previously discussed, a major barrier to safety is the inability of survivors to bring their pets with them when leaving an abusive environment. There simply aren’t enough co-sheltering programs to meet this need.

### Orders of Protection and Education on Availability

We identified a need for increased awareness around including pets in an order of protection. Only 1 person entering the URIPALS program included their pet in their order of protection at the time of entry. This is an important legal option for survivors seeking protection from their abusers, and more people should be aware of this in places where it is available. Currently, 30 states offer this option.

## CONCLUSION

The connection between domestic violence and pet abuse is very real, and in many cases, pet ownership becomes a barrier to safety because of the survivor’s unwillingness to leave their pet behind. This issue, combined with the lack of co-sheltering programs, points to a great need both in New York City and nationally for more services for domestic violence survivors who are pet owners. Therefore, it is vital for domestic violence service providers, animal advocates, funders and government partners to work together to support the growth of programs like URIPALS in order to ensure that people are able to leave an abusive environment with their entire family—pets included.

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## ABOUT URBAN RESOURCE INSTITUTE

Urban Resource Institute (URI) is a leading non-profit organization that provides comprehensive, holistic, and supportive human services programs that help individuals and families in the New York metropolitan area overcome obstacles and better their lives. With a rich 35-year legacy of social service research and expertise, deep community relationships, and a flexible, innovative approach to program development and service delivery, URI is uniquely equipped to provide solutions to the challenges affecting New York's most vulnerable populations. URI's hands-on programs for victims of domestic violence and the developmentally disabled are specifically tailored to meet the needs of the individual, while community outreach initiatives build wider visibility and support for the issues that have an impact on our clients' quality of life and New York's urban communities. For more information, please visit [www.urinyc.org](http://www.urinyc.org).



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