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Around Town



CREATURE COMFORTS PAWS' pets live in the lap of luxury.

Gimme shelter

The new PAWS humane center opens—and it's no fleabag motel. By **Martina Sheehan**

Fully furnished single- and double-occupancy apartments available immediately in heart of Lincoln Park neighborhood. Sunny, new construction features central air, skylights, fireplace and spacious rooftop deck. Cats and dogs okay. Monthly rent: free.

Too good to be true? Not if you're among an elite pack of lucky Chicago residents. The eligibility requirements: The luxury spaces are available exclusively to orphaned cats and dogs. Pets Are Worth Saving (PAWS)

Chicago, the city's largest no-kill humane organization, opens the doors of this new shelter on Saturday 8.

The rescue org, credited with helping reduce Chicago euthanasia rates by 50 percent since opening ten years ago, designed its brand-new Lincoln Park Adoption and Humane Center (1997 N Clybourn Ave) to revolutionize the way animal shelters operate. Accordingly, the new \$9 million, 13,000-square-foot deluxe facility features an in-house medical center, a shaded rooftop deck with a garden, and a state-of-the-art, 100 percent fresh-air filtration system.

Humans will find the new animal home welcoming, too: There's a designated volunteer space with lockers and showers, a coffee bar, an education and outreach room, and a

public welcome area that, with arched wood beams and a raised roof, exudes the Zen charm of an Aspen spa retreat.

This abundance might prompt some to question whether the funds—all private donations from companies and individuals—would've been put to better use in multiple, more modest adoption centers. PAWS founder and chairwoman Paula Fasseas explains her reasoning behind the deluxe digs. "We really wanted to change not only the way shelters operate but the way people view shelters," she says. "If shelters remain small, with animals in cages, people aren't going to want to go. I've heard people say, 'It's just too sad.'" And if potential adopters are uncomfortable or creeped out, she maintains, they'll look for new pets at a breeder or a pet store, shelters'

greatest competitors.

But what about the seemingly over-the-top bells and whistles—such as private suites, classical music piped into each animal's room, and interior-design elements like built-in alcoves—and even a kitty-room chandelier? "Almost everything you see is designed to reduce animal stress," explains PAWS executive director Rochelle Michalek. PAWS worked with renowned architects Holabird & Root, as well as national behavior experts who offered input on the design.

The result: Canines and cats are kept separately—Dog Town and Kitty City, respectively—and no more than two dogs will ever share a room. As for felines, Michalek notes that some suites are set aside for cat couples who've been together for years, as well as those with more "difficult" personalities.

"We really wanted to change the way people view shelters."

Fasseas says the resources invested in the homey new digs may be viewed as a long-term animal-welfare investment. "If the facility is more inviting to the public and to volunteers, PAWS will be able to adopt out more animals more quickly," she says. The group plans on finding homes for a record-breaking 1,700 animals this year. Also, the shelter's programs cultivate new pet advocates by sparking kids' interest with classes and mini-exhibits. "They'll be the animal-welfare leaders of tomorrow," she says of visiting school groups. "And they'll go on to tell their parents and neighbors."

The facility also will attempt to bring down the number returns. To do this, the org is labeling all its cats and dogs with color-coated personality tests not unlike those used by dating services. "Sometimes when you go to an animal shelter, the adoption process can seem more like an interrogation," Michalek says. The new system, she adds, will resemble matchmaking. Free follow-up counseling and care classes are then offered for as long as you own the pet. PAWS provides people these services for the same reason it caters to the animals: "We want all our matches to be good ones."

Lap up cuteness at the grand opening of PAWS' Adoption and Humane Center on Saturday 8. See listings.