

SKYLINE

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Crisis pets

Group tries to offer owners ways to keep their pets during recession

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Foreclosure. Eviction. Unemployment. Each setback is a call sign for the current economic crisis. And each is a reason why pet owners give up their four-legged companions. The specific circumstances may be different, but the problem is the same: the recession is putting a vise around households. Pets can then become expendable.

The crisis can be seen at the city pound — where adoptions peaked in 2005 at 3,541 but have declined every year since. With adoption hours at the pound recently cut, it's

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Chelsea Baggot, a volunteer at PAWS Chicago, watches over Kody and Kira outside the shelter in Lincoln Park. The shelter is taking in more pets during the recession because of people losing their jobs and their homes.

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likely that number will drop again.

Last year, around 21,800 animals were taken in by the city. Of those animals, 12,544 were euthanized, 1,133 were transferred to other shelters or organizations and 2,390 were adopted.

Those numbers concern groups like PAWS Chicago, a no-kill shelter with an adoption center in Lincoln Park, at 1997 N. Clybourn. If less animals are adopted from the city, more animals will be euthanized this year.

"There have been a lot more animals being given up for financial reasons or because of people losing their homes," said Jessica Hoffman, admissions coordinator for PAWS.

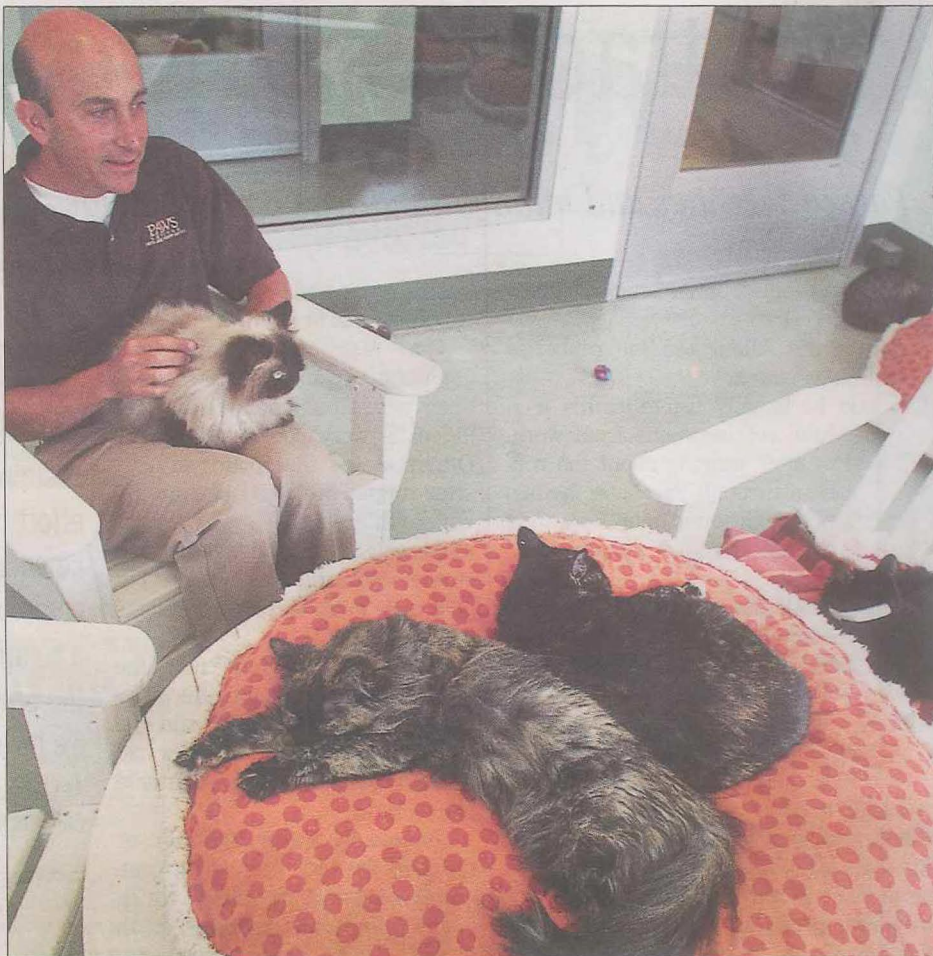
In light of the problem, PAWS has created two new programs that are designed to help beleaguered owners.

The first is a pet food bank program, which provides those struggling in the recession with the basics they need to care for their pets, such as food, cat litter, leashes, collars and even toys. The idea behind the program is that with a little help during hard times, owners will be able to keep their pets.

PAWS debuted the food bank late last year. Food and supplies come from donations made to PAWS through drop-off boxes at the adoption center and at the Lurie Spay/Neuter Clinic in Little Village. The pet supply chain store Petco and from groups like the Boy Scouts have also pitched in.

Susan Robinson, community outreach manager for PAWS, runs the pet food bank program. Robinson said there are currently around 500 animals taken care of through the food bank. The calls to sign up for it, she said, keep coming.

"It's only meant to be a temporary program, for about three to six months," Robinson said. "Hopefully, [after that] they will be back on their feet, because we just don't have the



Adoption Center Director Mike Goldberg watches as cats nap; Sarah Storck handles the kittens.



Photos by FRANK PINC/Staff Photographer

resources to continually help people. But we hope for a short period of time, at least, we can make a difference."

A second program deals with crisis care. It was designed to assist pet owners who have lost their home either through eviction or foreclosure.

The crisis care initiative will locate a temporary home for a pet while its owners find a new place to live. When an owner is back on his feet, the pet is returned.

"Our crisis care program has helped a lot of

people to keep their animal," Hoffman said. "Anytime that any of those guys get reunited is a really happy story."

Some owners, however, might not be able to get back on their feet so quickly, so PAWS has found a way to address their needs, too.

Normally, the shelter has a relinquishment fee ranging from \$100 to \$150 for an owner to give up a pet directly to them. There is sometimes also a waiting list since the shelter may not have the space.

If a pet owner faces an emergency and

isn't able to get the pet back within a couple of months, PAWS will put the animal up for adoption, waive the usual fees and skip the waiting list.

Robinson expects that demand for the pet food bank program, in particular, will continue to grow as more people hear about it; PAWS is looking for more donations so they can help as many animals as possible.

"We can use everything but we are always low on cat food and cat litter, and we'll take any kind of food," she said.