

PAWS helps pet owners during recession

By Suzanne Hanney & Alyssa Flisiak
StreetWise Editor-in-Chief & Contributor



Pets may not understand recessionary indicators but they feel their humans' pain when job loss or foreclosure creates tension in their household – and potentially makes it more precarious.

PAWS Chicago began its Crisis Care foster program in 2008 as a response to the recession; 103 animals were admitted that year and 125 in 2009.

“Whenever there is an economic downturn, the number of pets relinquished to animal shelters increases,” said Rochelle Michalek, PAWS executive director. There are usually 15 to 20 pets in the program at any given time.

PAWS stands for Pets Are Worth Saving and its mission has always been to make Chicago a no-kill city—where homelessness does not mean death.

By being proactive in addressing pet owners' needs during a recession, PAWS is working to reduce the number of animals permanently relinquished to shelters.

Decreasing the pet birth rate also keeps dog and cat numbers in line with human ownership, so the organization offered 17,147 surgeries last year at its Lurie Spay/Neuter Clinic, 3516 W. 26th St. The majority of these services were offered at low-cost to low-income Chicagoans. Medicaid recipients can receive the services for free.

And because every little bit helps pet owners during a financial crisis, PAWS offers a pet food bank. Funded totally through donations, the program distributed 46,400 pounds of food last year to just under 600 families. Those who wish to access this honesty-based program should call 773.475.9426 to make an appointment at PAWS' 26th Street location.

The organization also made the news March 23 when it accepted dogs from among 100 rescued from three Missouri puppy mills that shut down. The dogs—Pomeranians, cocker spaniels, German shepherds, Yorkshire terriers, Pekingese and a Jack-a-Bee (Jack Russell/beagle mix)—had spent their whole lives in cages with no proper veterinary care and little human contact.

As of early April, five dogs had been adopted and the others were healing. A 5-year-old, Pekingese, for example, shakes every time someone pets her for the first time but she warms up soon afterward, according to the PAWS web site. The four Pomeranians were shy; the 8-year-old German shepherd had a very sweet disposition but severe wearing of her teeth from gnawing on her cage bars.

Foster parents were helping these dogs

to slowly acclimate to home life so that they could be adopted. They need a calm place with stay-at-home humans and without children.

"It's a 24-hour commitment to help these guys come out of their shells, so that they aren't scared every time someone stands up," said Lisa Marie Nowak, PAWS director of development.

Volunteer foster parents spend two to four weeks with homeless pets, during which they offer food, water, toys "and lots of love," according to the web site. PAWS provides the medical care and follow-up support from a volunteer coordinator who is responsible for 10 to 30 foster families a month. PAWS averages 150 animals a day in over 85 foster homes.

Foster parents are also crucial to the Crisis Care program. Humans who are facing job loss or foreclosure can call PAWS and ask for an emergency admission, so that they are automatically bumped to the top of the foster list, said Sarah Ahlberg, PAWS development and communications manager. First, the pet will stay at the PAWS Rescue and Recovery Center on 26th Street until it passes a temperament test to be sure it is safe around human beings.

Then, the pet will go into the safe haven foster program until the owners are ready to take them back.

Foster care filled homelessness gap

"We've had animals for months and months," Ahlberg said. "Once we make a commitment, we make a commitment."

Patrice Rood successfully regained ownership of her two cats, Maddie and Izzy, after they spent about two months in the Crisis Care program last spring. Rood had lost her job and fallen behind on rent when she was told in November 2009 that she was to be evicted from her apartment.

Rood was allowed to stay in her apartment until spring. She entered her cats into the Crisis Care program at the beginning of April and was evicted in the last two weeks of May 2010. Maddie and Izzy spent time at PAWS' Rescue and Recovery Center and in two foster homes.

While the cats were with PAWS, Rood was allowed to visit them any time she wanted as long as she told PAWS she was coming. She said that even though the Rescue and Recovery Center is only open Sunday through Thursday, she was still able to visit the cats on Friday or Saturday if she gave advance notice.

"I could go see them any time, I could go open the cage, pet them, talk to them, bring

"My cats are my kids...that was a very emotional time for me and PAWS really helped me get through that."

them treats, bring them food," she said.

When Rood wasn't around the cats, PAWS volunteers were there. "The program is excellent," she said. "Even when you can't go visit, if you're busy, they have volunteers there on a daily basis that sit with those animals for hours and hours and hours on end, talking to them, petting them, giving them attention, helping your animals adjust to the transition as well."

Rood said that animals in the program also are spayed or neutered, micro-chipped, and updated on their vaccinations at no cost to the owner, and PAWS keeps a file on each pet with information about weight loss or gain, behavior issues and anything else that may happen during their stay with Crisis Care.

While Maddie and Izzy were at PAWS, Rood was trying to get back on her feet.

No room in the shelter

"My situation is, I'm an educated young woman who lost her job through lack of hours and it ultimately bit me in the butt in the end," Rood said, "and for two or three weeks I was sleeping outside, I was never sure of where I was going to lay my head at night, never sure of what I was going to eat that day."

During this period, Rood was in the Maywood area, where nightly shelters rotate around church basements in Maywood,

Oak Park, Berwyn and nearby suburbs. The PADS shelters are sleep-only but in high demand and on a first-come, first-served basis. She wasn't guaranteed a space on any given night, and if she had gotten a bed, she wouldn't have been able to leave her belongings in the shelter.

According to the terms of the Crisis Care program, if Rood couldn't reclaim ownership of her pets within 30 days, she was supposed to relinquish them for adoption. But because she kept in contact with PAWS and they could see that she was actively trying to improve her situation, they worked with her so she could keep Maddie and Izzy, and found a foster home that could keep them for 45 days.

Rood regained her pets when she moved in with a friend and returned to school. She said Maddie and Izzy had no problems readjusting to coming back to live with her, aside from meeting a new person and exploring a new home.

"[The Crisis Care program] was very nice and it actually benefited me and I think my girls too," she said, "because they were doing very well in the foster home, which was not a problem, but I was ready for them to come home and I think they were too."

"My cats are my kids," Rood said. "I've had them since they were seven weeks old and they're 2 1/2, so they are my children and that was a very emotional time for me and PAWS really helped me get through that."

