

IN CHICAGO, A FRESH APPROACH TO SHELTERS

→ Fireplace. Natural light. High ceilings. Art deco touches. Coffee. Classical music. Although this may seem at first blush to be the lobby of a five-star Chicago hotel, it's actually an animal shelter. PAWS Chicago, to be exact.

PAWS stands for Pets Are Worth Saving, and not only does this shelter look completely different, but it also behaves in a completely different manner.

Chicago's largest no-kill humane organization is focused not just on adoption, but also on shattering myths, holding community outreach programs to educate the public, and tackling rampant overpopulation by providing free spaying and neutering.

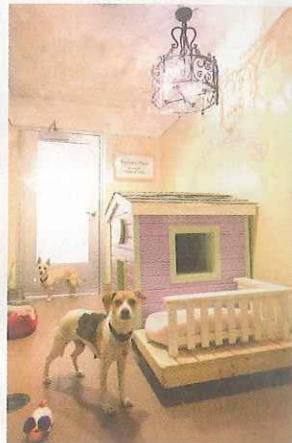
"I think of PAWS as a shelter and a spay-neuter clinic, but we're really a movement," founder and chair Paula Fasseas says. "We're a model of how shelters should be."

Founded in 1997 by Fasseas, PAWS Chicago boasts of rooms — not cages — with fresh airflow, glass walls, and comfy beds for the three to four dogs housed in each. The atmosphere is cozy and intimate, not cold and institutional. The state-of-the-art Lincoln Park shelter is the first of this kind in the Midwest and one of only a few like it in the entire nation. In addition, it relies on community donations, not government funding.

The welcoming environment of PAWS Chicago brings people in every day to visit and adopt, and has attracted 5,000 dedicated volunteers. The group projects that in 2012, almost 5,000 animals, including roughly 2,500 dogs, will find



SOFIA SPENTZAS, COURTESY PAWS CHICAGO



STEVE GRUBMAN, COURTESY PAWS CHICAGO

ABOVE: Natural light, high ceilings, and stylish rooms for dogs set PAWS Chicago apart. Funding for this room was donated by Chicago media icon Oprah Winfrey. **LEFT:** Paula Fasseas founded PAWS Chicago to rescue and improve the lives of homeless dogs in Chicago.

new homes. The euthanasia rate is only 3 percent; it's reserved for animals too sick to survive or too dangerous to be released. To ensure successful adoptions, PAWS Chicago created a Meet Your Match program, which matches potential owners' lifestyles and expectations with prescreened dogs.

"It's this whole getting away from the (shelter) stereotype," Fasseas says.

Dogs come from all over Chicago and beyond. Owners relinquish their pets, strays are rounded up, and at-risk dogs of all colors, sizes, breeds, and ages are pulled daily from Chicago's municipal shelter, Chicago Animal Care and Control. In fact, since PAWS Chicago opened its doors 15 years ago, the city shelter's euthanasia rate has dropped 75 percent, from 42,000 homeless pets killed in 1997 to 10,117 in 2011, according to PAWS Chicago.

It was that huge euthanasia rate that inspired Fasseas to create PAWS Chicago. That, and a spunky terrier from the Greek island of Crete. On a trip to Greece in 1996, Fasseas fell in love with a

young dog and took him home with her, saving him from certain death. The family bonded with little Pippen so deeply, Fasseas' daughter began volunteering at Chicago's city shelter. Both she and her mother were shocked at the high number of animals killed every year and the low adoption rate. So Fasseas began by taking a few dogs and cats out of the shelter and finding them homes. Quickly, her efforts exploded, and before long, PAWS Chicago was born.

Fasseas is extremely proud of PAWS Chicago's Lurie Spay/Neuter Clinic, one of the largest free clinics in the nation. It is located in and serves the under-resourced Chicago communities. More than 18,000 pets will be sterilized in 2012, bringing the total to 130,000 since 2001, according to PAWS Chicago.

With the success of voluntary spaying and neutering, "this problem starts to become smaller and smaller and more manageable," Fasseas says.

For more information about PAWS Chicago, visit www.pawschicago.org — *Kyra Kirkwood*

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The efforts of PAWS Chicago to aid and rescue dogs inspired FreeKibble.com, a website dedicated to providing nutritious food to shelter animals, to donate 5,000 meals to PAWS Chicago.