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# **KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER**

## *Safety Net Toolkit*



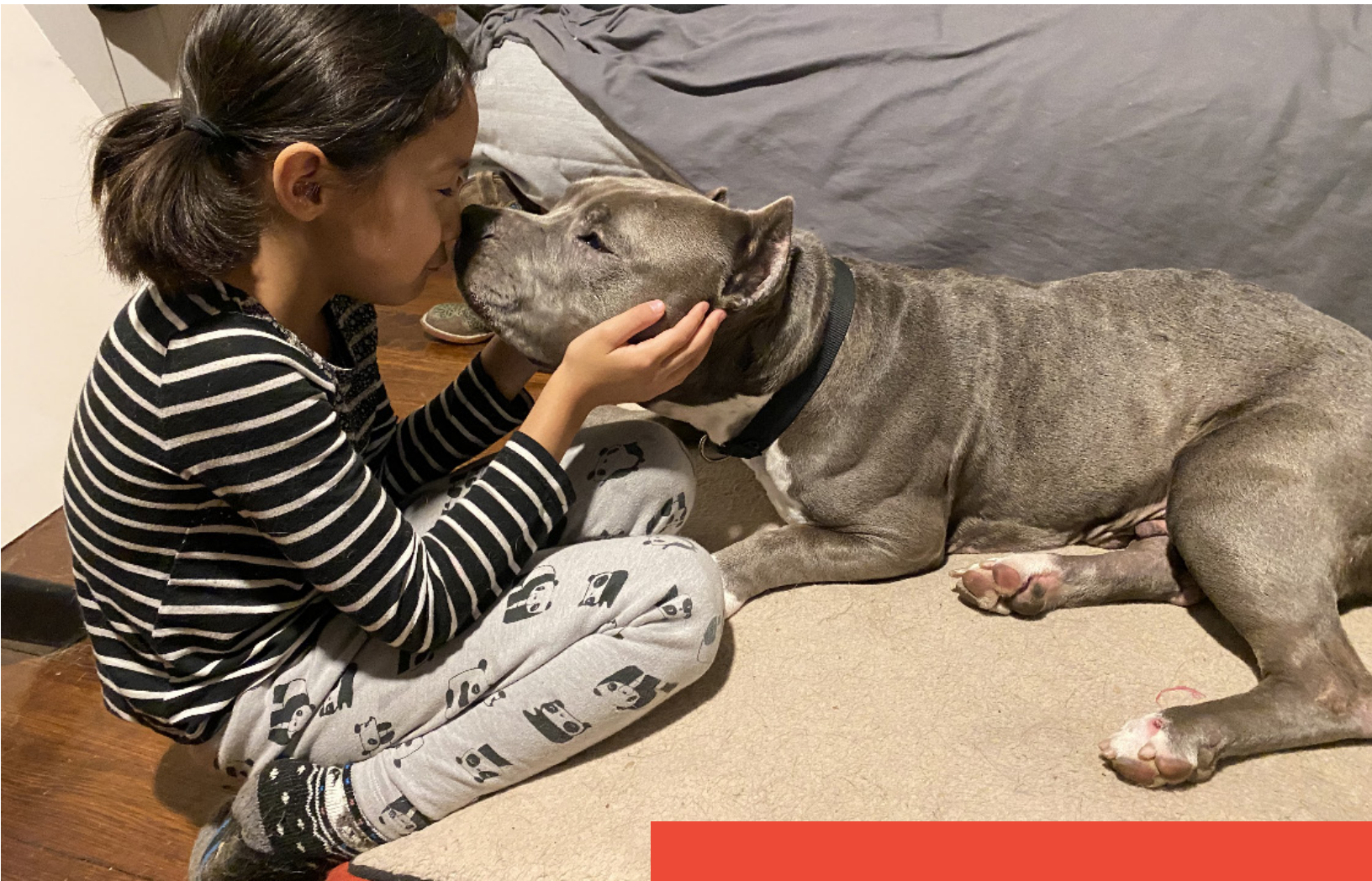
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**HUMAN ANIMAL  
SUPPORT SERVICES**  
by **american** **PETS ALIVE!**

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# PART 1: *The Basics*

Congratulations! You've just taken the first step towards helping more pets and people in your community. If you work in animal welfare—whether you're a shelter, a rescue, or another type of organization—you know pet owners are struggling now more than ever to keep and care for their beloved pets. You probably also know that 98% of pet owners consider their pets to be family members who are as important as their human family members.

As animal welfare professionals, we can do so much to provide a safety net to vulnerable pet owners.

While some of the materials in this guide are specifically written for animal shelters to help them begin providing safety net services in addition to their intake services, this toolkit is really for anyone who wants to help pets and people in their community.

If you are an animal welfare professional, a volunteer, a concerned community advocate, a foster caregiver, a member of a rescue group, or someone who just wants to help, this guide is for you!

## **What is Human Animal Support Services?**

Human Animal Support Services, or HASS, is a project comprised of thousands of animal welfare professionals and organizations working together to create a more community-centered approach to animal services. Historically, the work of animal shelters, particularly those that followed the "pound" model, was to take animals from people and rehome or euthanize them. Instead of creating safety net systems to help people and pets stay together, the old model operated on a system of permanent and complete separation.

*HASS aims to change this, creating a new system that focuses first on keeping pets and people together, even in tough times.*

The ultimate goal is that the only animals who come into the animal shelter are the ones who truly need to be there, while others are served in their homes and communities.

## **Who is a vulnerable pet owner?**

A vulnerable pet owner is anyone who is at risk of having to give up their pet. This person may have lost their housing. They might have to work three jobs and don't feel they have time to care for their pet. They may be unable to provide food or medical care for their pet. Importantly, most of us could become a vulnerable pet owner and could need help to keep our pet.

From here forward, we'll talk from the assumption that you are the helper and you are providing a safety net for someone who needs help, but we will approach people and pets we are helping with humility, respect, and kindness, knowing one day we might need help ourselves!

## What is a safety net program?

A safety net program is anything we do to help keep pets and people together. Safety net programs include assistance with food and supplies, emergency boarding and foster care, access to emergency and routine veterinary care, helping pet owners find pet-inclusive housing, and facilitating mutual aid, a system where community members are empowered to help their neighbors.

## What is the problem safety net programs solve?

If you've ever stood in a shelter intake department lobby, you have heard some of the most heartbreaking stories and seen the tears of loving pet owners who have been forced to make a decision to give up their pet, simply because they lack the resources to keep them.

Safety net programs give you the tools and expertise to support pet owners with options to keep their pets—an idea that just a decade ago, seemed impossible. Today, we can harness the power of helping pets and people as a unit, instead of permanently and completely separating the pet from their person in order to help the pet.

## What are the benefits of helping people and pets stay together?

**There are almost too many benefits to name, but here are a few big ones:**

First, these programs improve staff and volunteer morale by empowering your team to keep pets and people together. In the past, shelter workers had no options other than to take in the pet. In most cases, the pet's owner wasn't even allowed to know what happened to their pet.

The old system was as inhumane to people as it was to animals. Today, we can be creative, innovative, and solutions-focused, thinking of new ways to support the human animal bond. Practicing safety net programs makes for happier, more engaged staff and volunteers.

Additionally, keeping families together creates a new community culture. When struggling pet owners are able to access resources and other forms of support for their pets, they tell neighbors and friends—which in turn leads to shelter surrender becoming the last resort, not the first action.



*A man in St. Petersburg, Florida, started a free pet food box, modeled after little free libraries, to honor his beloved dog Hank after Hank died from cancer.*

Finally, safety net programs draw volunteers, foster caregivers, and donors to animal welfare organizations because everyone is invited to be part of the solution.

## Who can start and run safety net programs?

What's so exciting about these programs is that anyone can do them. If you are with a shelter or rescue, you can start and run safety net programs to greatly increase the number of pets and people you can help! But you don't have to have special skills or even be part of a formal organization, like a shelter, to get started.

Anyone can start and run a safety net organization. In fact, entire nonprofit organizations are springing up for the purpose of keeping pets and people together.



*When Rain the puppy's new mom noticed little Rain was losing fur, she became very worried. Wanting to take good care of her, but without a lot of resources for expensive vet bills, [Rain's mom brought the puppy to Neighborhood Pets](#) where Rain's skin condition was diagnosed and treated—and then Rain went back home with her mom. This kind of safety net support can be the difference between a pet staying with the people who love them, or being surrendered to a shelter.*

Two great examples are [My Pit Bull is Family](#), an organization dedicated to helping dog owners stay with their pets, even in tough times, and an organization called [Neighborhood Pets](#) that provides supplies and services to help pet owners.

## How do safety net programs help make my animal shelter better for dogs?

By building safety net programs into your daily operations, you can reduce the number of dogs who enter the shelter and keep more dogs in their homes and communities, saving time and resources while creating a more humane system for dogs and their people.

You can learn more by watching sessions from the Big Dog Masterclass, which we co-hosted in March of 2022—and which more than 3,500 people registered for, making it the largest animal welfare conference in history! Access [day one](#) and [day two](#) of the conference and, as you'll learn in each session, safety net programs have a crucial role to play in the overall success of animal shelter management.

## What are some services we can offer the community?

Support may include, but is not limited to: telephone response and advice, veterinary care or vouchers for owned pets, food and supplies, fence-building materials and assistance, behavior support, vaccines and microchips, free and low-cost spay and neuter, crisis and emergency boarding, safety net fostering, and pet rent deposits, as well as connecting owners to affordable, pet-inclusive housing.



*Pancake went missing and while her family searched for her, she was hit by a car and brought to an emergency clinic by Baltimore City Animal Control, through partnerships with BARCS Animal Shelter. The vet said Pancake was lucky to be alive. Because of a **speciality fund set up by BARCS** to cover pets with extraordinary medical needs, Pancake's surgery and medical treatment were paid for and she was quickly reunited with her family.*

## Are safety net programs specifically for dogs?

From here on out, we'll be talking mostly about dogs, but safety net programs apply to just about every kind of animal because they harness the love between people and animals. Safety net programs can help cats, "pocket pets" like gerbils and hamsters, farmed animals like horses and goats, exotic pets like parrots and snakes, and any other animal considered a companion, or family member, to a caregiver.

## PART 2: *How To*

Introduction: When you start to think and learn about the amazing potential of safety net programs, it is tempting to jump right in and start helping keep dogs and people together. Before you start offering services, here are some easy, simple steps you should take first.

1. **Create a way for the public to easily contact you** if they have a dog-related problem. You can set up a pet support hotline, a web page where people can email you, or even use remote technology to create a web chat function. This is the first step, because as long as people have to show up, in person, with their dog, the impact of your programs will be limited.

**Talk about it:** To really maximize the impact of your safety net programs, you need to get the word out! This [Keeping Families Together communications kit](#), created by Human Animal Support Services and HeARTs Speak, has editable graphics, media pitch templates, FAQs, and more customizable materials as well as sample social media posts and storytelling inspiration, to help you talk to your community about how you are keeping pets and people together, and how anyone can be a part of it—whether it's someone who needs support to care for a pet, or someone who wants to pitch in as a volunteer.

2. **Review your data.** In your community and/or animal shelter, what are the biggest reasons people are giving up their dogs? You will likely find some overarching themes. Based on the results of your research, determine which of these issues you want to tackle first. You can start with just one, or jump into addressing them all, depending on your time and resources.

3. **Map your community's existing resources.** What programs and services already exist that people in your community may not know about? Make a list of all the organization that help address some aspect of why dog owners are forced to give up their dogs. This is called ["Ecosystem Mapping."](#) Learn more about how to do this and access our templates in the Human Animal Support Services [Pro Resources](#). The goal is to have an [ideal animal welfare ecosystem](#) filled with resources and services to help pet caretakers.

4. **Read up on [how to pilot a program](#).** Over the past five years, we've helped hundreds of shelters successfully launch new programs. The method involves internal and external communication, defining the timeline for implementation, and troubleshooting any issues or unintended consequences that arise. This method of piloting works so we recommend following the steps carefully and tracking your results.

5. **Determine how you will track your safety net program.** Animal shelter software systems are not yet developed to track services and support outside of animal control and shelter intake, but you have plenty of options that you can find in [the HASS Technology Catalog](#). You may use something as simple as a spreadsheet to track your program, or an external software system. Some organizations have also figured out how to use existing software systems to track helping pets and people. For example, you can use existing software systems to track the number of calls for help, how your agency responded, and the outcomes of the calls.

6. **Remove barriers.** Barriers have a significant, negative impact on your ability to help dogs and people. Review all of your current policies and practices to identify barriers to getting dogs adopted, sent to foster caregivers, and returned to their owners. Here is a list of [barriers we commonly see in animal welfare organizations](#). If your organization has a lot of barriers now, you are likely to also create barriers in your safety net programs, which will diminish their impact.

### Some of the common reasons owners surrender their dogs are:

- Inability to afford routine or emergency medical care
- "Behavior" problems like barking or destructive behavior—often the result of the dog being alone too much or not having training and enrichment
- Lack of affordable, pet-inclusive housing, especially for large dogs
- The owner is too busy and feels they don't have enough time to care for their dog
- Overall economic issues and the inability to afford food and supplies
- Life crises like eviction, the owner getting sick, mental health crises, and major life transitions

# PART 3: *Safety Net Programs*

In this guide, we are teaching you how to implement several basic safety net programs. By implementing one or all of these programs, you will see fewer dogs enter the shelter and an increase in the number of dogs and owners you can help.

There is a direct link between the amount of resources and time you invest and the level of impact for your organization and community. If resources are limited, consider beginning with the program you believe (based on your data) will impact the highest number of dogs and people.

## The programs we'll cover here are:

1. Triage and Case Management
2. Safety Net Fostering and Boarding
3. Distributing Food and Supplies
4. Access to Veterinary Care
5. Human Services and Community Partnerships
6. Housing Support Services

You can find more information on programs and services to keep pets and people together on [the HASS website](#).

## TRIAGE AND CASE MANAGEMENT

Helping keep pets and people together means your staff and volunteers must first commit to treating every person and dog as an individual and treating every situation individually, with the goal of maintaining the bond between that person and dog.

A first step for many organizations is to observe the current system. What you will likely find is that your staff and volunteers are on “autopilot” and they see their job as transactional—meaning they see their role as getting basic information and intaking the dog.

We have never taught animal welfare professionals or volunteers the critical thinking and problem-solving skills they need to provide case management, so most organizations need to press reset with staff and volunteers.





**In general, staff members will need three things to be able to provide effective case management:**

- **Empowerment:** Staff need time and permission to help people keep their dogs, versus taking those dogs into the shelter system.
- **Knowledge:** Your team needs to know the resources that are available and how to access them. This includes mapping your resource ecosystem and compiling resources as well as having simple standard operating procedures (SOPs) and forms that tell people how to distribute a resource.
- **Culture:** It might be hard for your staff and volunteers to let go of the old way of doing things. They may also have beliefs such as that “if you can’t afford a dog, you shouldn’t have one.” To change this, your staff and volunteers will need to know the “why” of safety net programs as well as the expectations for how they communicate with pet owners who need support.

## How does it work?

It’s really simple so don’t let this guide overwhelm you. In fact, case management can be started entirely by volunteers. All you need is a way for people to contact you, a list of resources that address common dog-related problems, and someone willing to help people brainstorm solutions so they can keep their dog if they want to.

In Pima County, Arizona, the [Pet Support Center](#) was started by a couple of volunteers with a big binder of information and resources. Today, this program keeps thousands of dogs out of the shelter every year.

## Here are a few examples of how case management and triage work in real life:

*Brigit calls the animal shelter hotline because her dog is barking while she is at work all day and the landlord is threatening to evict her if she doesn’t get the problem under control. Brigit is in tears because she is working two jobs and knows her dog is anxious because he is alone so much.*

*The case manager learns that Brigit has had her dog for four years, but these problems only recently developed when*

*she started working more. The case manager sends Brigit information about enrichment and exercise, and connects her with an affordable dog walker who can visit her dog during the day. The case manager also offers to connect Brigit to the shelter’s volunteer dog behavior support group. This group has a deal with a local doggie daycare and Brigit’s dog gets into daycare several days per week.*

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*Terrence’s dog Mac has seemed sick for several days. On the third day, with no signs of improvement, Terrence takes Mac to an emergency vet, where he pays \$600 for an X-ray and diagnosis. He learns Mac has ingested a sock and will need expensive surgery to save his life. Terrence doesn’t have enough money to pay for this surgery, and he is not eligible for Care Credit. He calls the shelter in a panic, asking to bring his dog in so his beloved Mac can get lifesaving surgery.*

*The case manager immediately connects Terrence to the shelter's voucher program and makes him an appointment at a local, low-cost clinic. Mac gets the surgery he needed and these two best friends stay together.*

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*Shawn is new to town and needs to find an affordable place for them and their pit bull-type dog. They've called every rental they can think of but breed restrictions and pet fees are making it impossible for Shawn to find an apartment.*

*They contact the local pet support volunteer organization in town and ask for ideas—and the case manager gives them a list of properties. There are six in Shawn's price range that do not have breed restrictions and Shawn finds housing for them and their dog.*

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*Cynthia just turned 85 and she lives in a small apartment with her 12-year-old dog Gracie. Cynthia considers Gracie to be her closest family member but lately Cynthia has been struggling to afford food for Gracie. The meal delivery service in town brings her food, which she splits with Gracie, but in truth neither of them is getting enough to eat.*

*The food delivery volunteer contacts the animal shelter to see if they can help and the person who answers the phone tells them about the free food pantry the shelter holds every week. The meal service delivery volunteer says she doesn't know how they will get the pet food for Cynthia, so the shelter worker looks in the volunteer database and discovers one of the shelter volunteers lives in the same apartment complex. She contacts the shelter volunteer who enthusiastically offers to deliver pet food to Cynthia whenever she needs it.*

*Eventually, Cynthia and the shelter volunteer strike up a friendship, and the shelter volunteer can even babysit for Gracie when Cynthia has to go to the hospital for a medical procedure.*



## **The bottom line**

Whether or not you have financial resources and dedicated staff, you can start helping people immediately just by sharing information and connecting struggling dog owners with existing resources in the community. If you are really strapped for time and resources, you can also put most of this information on your website and direct pet owners to your site to get help.

# SAFETY NET FOSTERING AND BOARDING

For pet owners experiencing a temporary crisis, having a safe place for their pet to go for a short time can make all the difference. During the pandemic, safety net programs began popping up all over the country and the results have been nothing short of incredible.



***Rocky's family was facing a crisis and needed help. Verona Street Animal Shelter in Rochester, NY, set up a foster home for Rocky to live for a couple of months until his family could get back on their feet. After two months, his family was ready to be reunited with their sweet and loving pet. Rocky and his family were overjoyed to be back together!***

*It turns out, when people are in crisis, a little help goes a long way. Providing boarding vouchers, boarding services, or, even better, foster placement for owned pets, is an easy program to start, and the payoff is huge.*

**The first step is to learn what kinds of temporary crises are impacting a particular individual and their pet. Some common situations we see include the following scenarios:**

*An older adult needs to go to the hospital but has no one to care for their dog so they avoid getting the care they need, sometimes even risking death to stay with their pet.*

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*A dog owner has lost their current housing and cannot move into their new apartment for three weeks, during which time they are living in their car and working during the day, leaving them with nowhere for their dog to go.*

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*A dog owner is incarcerated, and is scheduled to be released in 25 days. They do not want to give up their dog but they have no way to care for them while they are in jail.*

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*A person experiences a mental health crisis and needs to be temporarily hospitalized. They don't have close friends or family so they don't have anywhere for their pet to go while they get help.*

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*A family has to travel out of state to attend the funeral of a close family member and they have nowhere for their dog to go. They do not have the financial means to pay for boarding and even though they'll only be gone for five days, they might have to surrender their dog.*

In each of these situations, the staff member or volunteer must use critical thinking skills and a case management approach to assess the situation and determine whether support vs. surrender is the best course of action. In some of these cases, shelter surrender might be the best course of action—but in most situations, if temporary housing can be obtained and the pet can return to a safe, loving home, safety net housing is a positive alternative.

**Each form of housing has pros and cons and many organizations use a combination of types of housing. Here are the three most common safety net housing options:**

**1. Boarding at the shelter.**

**Pros:** Good for very short-term housing of under two weeks.

**Cons:** Can take up valuable kennel space and if the shelter is euthanizing for space, shelter kennels should not be used for owned pets. Also uses staff and volunteer time to care for dogs.

**2. Boarding at an offsite boarding facility.**

**Pros:** Recommended for situations involving family violence where it is safer for the dog to be in an undisclosed location. Also good for longer-term housing of dogs for up to three months.

**Cons:** This is a costly option and the dog is still held in a kennel environment so not suitable for long-term housing except in special cases.



***Chino and Kyle spent two months in BARCS' Home Away from Home emergency boarding program, while their family was displaced and living in a hotel where the dogs couldn't stay.***

### 3. Housing in a foster home.

**Pros:** Recommended for almost any animal for short and long-term safety net housing.

Great for dogs who can be in a home with other friendly dogs. Excellent way to engage the community and get lots of people to help. The most cost efficient solution for housing and the best for long-term safety net housing.

**Cons:** A lot of communication is required to make this work and some may have concerns about managing the relationship between the owner, the foster caregiver, and the organization, though this has rarely been reported to be a problem. Possible higher risk of a dog getting lost or injured, but the benefits far outweigh the risks.

#### What makes safety net fostering and boarding programs successful?

- You should have a form that clearly lays out the expectations for the dog owner, including the duration of the safety net housing and what happens if the owner does not reclaim the dog or needs to extend the housing period.
- The owner should have an easy, fast way to communicate with the organization and you should also clearly spell out the amount of time you can spend engaging with the owner. We have found owners often want to visit their dog regularly and get detailed status updates, both of which can be challenging for a busy organization.
- Find out from the owner if they have a case manager or support person who can serve as a secondary point of contact. When people are in crisis, it can sometimes be hard to reach them via phone or email so it's a good idea to have a second and even third person to contact.
- You should have a liability clause reviewed by an attorney to state that you are not liable in the case a pet gets loose or injured while in your custody. Make sure any pet is microchipped and licensed once they enter your organization, and that dogs have a well-fitted collar and a tag.

#### How long should you provide safety net housing?

It depends on the time and resources of your organization. If you start with a 14 or 30 day initial period, you can always extend it on a case by case basis.

Each situation is unique but keep in mind that holding a dog for a months-long or even year-long period will mean there are a lot of other dogs with short-term needs you cannot assist.

#### The bottom line

We love safety net housing programs and we think they should exist in every community!

These programs are relatively easy to start and pose a low risk to the organization. If you're nervous about the idea, start by piloting the program with just a couple of dogs and track the results.

People who use this service are typically happy to provide testimonials—and safety net programs are hugely popular with donors, volunteers, foster caregivers, and advocates. You'll get kudos from your community and help pet owners get through a tough moment.

Plus, there is simply nothing better than the moment the owner and the pet are reunited. Have your tissues ready and, if the owner is OK with it, record that moment for social media and up your engagement in a big way!



***Humane Rescue Alliance in Washington, DC loads a vehicle with pet food and supplies for distribution.***

## **DISTRIBUTING FOOD AND SUPPLIES**

Get creative and you will think of countless ways that you can share food and supplies to help people and dogs stay together. Here are a few examples of how you can help pet owners just by giving them the stuff they need:

- Make go packs of food, water bowls, leashes, treats, water bottles, and other goodies, and deliver them to your community homeless outreach center or supply distribution center. Be sure to include a card or item with your pet support hotline and/or information about free vaccines, spay and neuter services, and microchipping!
- Ask people who live in under-resourced communities if they would like to have food and supplies to hand out to their neighbors in need.
- Set up weekly or monthly distributions of pet food. You can break up large food bags into gallon-size portions to make the food go farther.
- Deliver food and supplies to places where people experiencing homelessness congregate and use it as an opportunity to talk to people and let them know the ways you can help.
- Contact case managers at your local human services agencies and let them know you have food and supplies available if any of their clients need them.
- Send animal protection officers, outreach staff, and volunteers with food and supplies in their vehicles and empower them to give these things to anyone who needs them.
- Have a food pantry at your shelter that is accessible to anyone who comes to the shelter and needs food at any time.
- When you return a dog to an owner and the dog looks a bit underweight, offer to send the owner home with dog food and advise them on how much their dog should be eating every day.
- Keep food in your vehicle at all times, along with cards or flyers with contact information for your organization and information about your organization's safety net programming.

This way you can be ready to give food to people who need it wherever and whenever you encounter them.

This list could go on indefinitely because there is just so much need for pet food in most of America. You often hear about how many people are going hungry every day in America and the same is true for pets.

People who are struggling to keep their pets need our help, not our judgment. If you don't know about the [Pets for Life program](#) by the Humane Society of the United States, you can read about it here. This program was instrumental in normalizing pet food distribution to struggling pet owners.

**Here is a list of common items that can really help dog owners:**

- Healthy, age-appropriate dog food and treats
- Collars, leashes, and harnesses appropriate to the size of the dog
- Enrichment items, toys, and bones
- Collapsible water bowls and water
- Dog jackets and coats for cold weather
- Dog tennis shoes and paw protectors for protection against hot pavement
- Supplies to build or repair fences
- Flea and tick treatment
- Beds and blankets



***A woman carries an arm load of dog toys and her two chihuahuas after a vaccine clinic.***

All of the above items can be tremendously helpful to dog owners in different circumstances, so use a case management approach to determine the best supplies and food to solve a particular issue.

For instance, a dog owner who is struggling to provide adequate enrichment and exercise for their dog might benefit from enrichment and chew toys, appropriate walking equipment, and a crate, whereas a dog owner who does not have working heat would benefit most from healthy food and a warm jacket for their dog. A person who is experiencing homelessness might be able to easily access dog food, but may need a sturdy leash and collar, along with flea and tick treatment.

*Don't assume what people need the most for their pets. Instead, ask them and then work to fulfill that need.*

**Wondering where the heck you will get all this “stuff” to give pet parents?** Once you start asking, you will be blown away by how much you can collect for pets. Here are some easy ways to collect donations:

- Ask local pet stores, grocery stores, and other businesses that sell pet supplies and food
- Create an organizational wish list on Amazon
- Create a list of things you need and post it on your website and social media. Be sure to let the public know donations may be used for sheltered pets or distributed to struggling pet owners
- Alert the media when you need a particular item. For instance, if you do a dog jacket drive at the beginning of spring, you can get lots of people to donate jackets which you can use once it gets cold again

**Have too much stuff?** When organizations begin collecting and distributing supplies in earnest, they sometimes find that they have too much stuff or that they are receiving donations they can't necessarily use. If that is the case for you, consider reaching out to other nonprofit organizations that help people, as well as groups that care for wildlife and farmed animals. Chances are, even if you can't use something, someone else can!

### **How do we ensure we're not reinforcing negative stereotypes?**

While we are huge fans of distribution programs, these programs tend to reinforce the idea of there being two types of pet owners—those who need and those who give.

If you want to do something to change this, you could consider holding a food and supply distribution event where you also do pet adoptions.

You can also provide resources to people working within their own communities to distribute resources and food themselves.

Finally, you can also recruit for paid job positions at food distribution events. This way, you can double your impact by recruiting great employees and helping people who love their pets!

## **ACCESS TO VETERINARY CARE**

This is one of the most significant barriers to keeping people and dogs together and it's also potentially one of the most challenging to implement. We included access to veterinary care in this guide but it is a complex topic so please visit [the HASS External Facing Medical Care toolkit](#) for a comprehensive guide to providing care to owned pets in your community.



***Veterinary services for a dog in need.***



## What are we talking about, when we talk about access to veterinary care?

The short answer is: basically everything medical. Here are a few key vet needs we see result in the separation of dogs and their people.

- Flea and tick treatment
- Heartworm preventative, testing, and treatment
- Treatment for common skin conditions like ringworm and mange
- Treatment for ear and eye infections
- Treatment for potentially deadly diseases like parvovirus and distemper
- Minor surgical procedures
- Wound care and treatment of injuries
- Medication and other treatment for manageable, treatable conditions
- Emergency surgical procedures
- Spay or neuter surgery
- Vaccines
- Wellness care like grooming and nail-clipping

## What conditions should we prioritize?

Here, we're focused on providing veterinary care in order to prevent a dog from being surrendered to an animal shelter.

To determine how to best spend your resources, you should first look at your data to learn what medical conditions are most likely to result in a dog being surrendered to a shelter.

In many organizations, you will find dogs are surrendered for two primary reasons: old age and associated manageable conditions, and because they have an emergency illness or injury and their owner cannot afford treatment.

Addressing these issues will require a case management approach because you'll need to determine the immediate and ongoing medical needs and how you will assist the owner.

## How do you pay for all of this?

Friends groups and nonprofits have had a great deal of success fundraising. Some organizations actually help dog owners crowdfund on social media.

You can reach out to veterinarians in your community about partnering. Talk to volunteers and donors about identifying potential veterinarians in your community to reach out to. Here is a [sample email to vets](#) and a [sample letter to partner clinics](#) explaining the request. You can also partner with local vet schools, vet tech programs, and grooming programs.

If you're trying to determine if you should provide care in-house or through partnerships, or if you are considering starting a public veterinary clinic, check out the [HASS External Facing Medical Care Pro Resource](#).

## For those feeling overwhelmed

If you're thinking, "This sounds really hard and there's a vet shortage so I don't think we can do this one," take a deep breath and consider what you CAN do.

You might be able to engage volunteer groomers for a special event, or help just one dog whose owner is in an impossible situation.

You might just start by providing flea and tick treatment to make dogs a little more comfortable.

There are ways you can start providing medical care for owned pets, no matter the size and resources in your organization.



### ***Veterinary services for a dog in need.***

*In one of the large shelters we work with, they used to prohibit returning dogs to their owners if the owner surrendered the dog due to a medical condition they could not afford to treat. Then one day, an older man who used a wheelchair and was on a limited income was out walking his beloved dog and best friend, when the dog was attacked by a Javelina, a wild animal native to Arizona where this man lived.*

*The dog was badly injured and when animal control arrived at the scene, the man who was also injured, signed over custody of his dog so they could receive emergency treatment at the shelter.*

*The veterinarian at the shelter performed surgery and saved the dog's life, but instead of keeping and rehoming the dog, who already had a loving owner, they drove the dog back to the man's home so the pair could be reunited. The man broke down in tears and was sobbing. He said "thank you," over and over again as he held his dog, who was equally happy to see him.*

*After that, the shelter reconsidered its policy and no longer has the old rule.*

## **HUMAN SERVICES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

Successful community partnerships allow for the expansion of programs and services and increase support for families to keep their pets. These partnerships, in turn, may decrease the number of animals who need to enter the physical animal shelter.

Have you ever attended a community meeting about homelessness? Have you been part of a human services discussion on providing vaccines and medical care to vulnerable people? Have you attended an event aimed at informing and empowering families facing eviction?

For most of us, the answer is probably no and that's a big problem. We are so busy saving animals that we don't take the time to build the relationships with local groups that could help us keep people and pets together.

When the animal welfare industry first began talking about partnerships in animal welfare, we had this belief that a partnership had to include some sort of activity or action. For instance, we would form a partnership with the libraries to have children read to pets. In another example, we formed a partnership with community centers to hold vaccine clinics in the park, and a partnership with fire departments in which we provide them with microchip scanners so people can get lost pets scanned without them coming to the shelter.

These were and are all great ideas with positive community impact. The problem is, this idea that community partnerships had to be kind of a big deal actually dissuaded lots of small, busy organizations from building partnerships.

When we talk about community partnerships as part of building a better safety net for pets and the people they love, we are really advocating for something much less complicated.

### **What does it mean to partner with other organizations?**

At its most basic level, a partnership between an animal welfare organization and another agency can mean that someone from the animal welfare agency attends community meetings where pets may be part of the discussion.

It can also mean that we connect with caseworkers who help families find affordable housing, so they know that we can help advise on finding affordable housing that is pet-inclusive as well.

Human services professionals where you live often just need to know that you do provide support and they need to know how they can refer dog-owning families to get help.

### **A few easy ways to partner with other organizations include:**

- Attend community meetings and introduce yourself to the leaders with a one minute pitch about how you help
- Establish a phone or email line for case managers and other professionals who need to get information quickly
- Provide supplies or services to human services agencies where pets are involved
- Help local domestic violence shelters or homeless shelters provide housing for people with their dogs—by giving advice, seeking out good example organizations, and/or donating enclosures
- Contact courts, jails, hospitals, health departments, and other groups to let them know you have programs to keep people and dogs together

When animal services agencies connect with other organizations, both benefit to better support people and pets where they live. Creating relationships with human and environmental organizations that may not traditionally help animals offers a more holistic approach to care.

## What kinds of organizations can we partner with?

Potential partner organizations may include [child welfare agencies](#), [organizations providing support for people experiencing homelessness](#), [scouting](#) and [youth organizations](#), [chambers of commerce](#), [social services agencies](#), [public health agencies](#), [food pantries](#), [senior services agencies](#), [domestic violence support services](#), [government agencies](#), [nonprofit organizations](#), and [organizations that promote racial and social justice and equity](#).

Resources to find local providers and potential partners can be found at [findhelp.org](https://findhelp.org) and [The United Way 2-1-1](#).

## How to start

1. Decide what you want to accomplish through partnerships and possible organizations that you want to connect with.
2. Have a simple resource list ready to share that tells organizations how you help, how to contact you, and resources available in the community for pet owners.
3. If you make contact with an organization and you have an idea of how you could work together, you can ask them the best way to move forward, whether it is an in-person meeting or something else.
4. Assign a point person to manage anything you are going to try to accomplish together. For instance, if you are going to start a partnership in which volunteers check in on dogs owned by older adults in a senior living facility, make sure someone in your organization is managing the expectations of both sides, the timeline, the scope of the work, the specific volunteer role, and any unintended consequences that arise.
5. Tell people about your partnerships and collaborative endeavors. Tell volunteers, staff members, the public, your adopters, foster caregivers, the media, and anyone else who will be as excited as you are about this relationship. Partnerships are an effective way to gain community support, get more volunteers, increase donations, and impress your local government leadership!

## The bottom line

Partnerships and collaborative initiatives are one of the most exciting developments in animal welfare. The possibilities are almost endless when it comes to the types of partnerships you can build and the things you can do together.

## Conclusion: We learned lessons so you don't have to!

These programs have each been piloted in dozens or even hundreds of organizations since the beginning of the pandemic. With all the lessons we've learned while creating and doing these programs, we are concluding this manual by sharing some of the things we've learned that we believe will help you and your organization be successful.

1. **Anyone can start a safety net program.** If you are completely overwhelmed and feel like you simply cannot add another program or service to your plate, don't worry. There is someone who wants to help and you just have to find them. Ask volunteers, foster



caregivers, members of the public, people from other organizations, students, and others for help. State your need, your goal, and what help you need—and be ready to say YES when the help comes. No one needs a special degree or skill set in order to help another person.

2. **People need training and support.** What we have seen in many organizations is that people go back to their comfort zone and do what feels familiar. In this case, that means they revert to a separation-based, transactional model of animal services whenever they feel stressed or overwhelmed. Make space and time to bring staff and volunteers on the journey to build these programs and establish them as core functions of your organization.
3. **Approach safety net programs with a commitment to ongoing learning and cultural humility.** Building a culture of safety net services in your organization is a lot like going on a long journey. Changing an old system to something new and more complex is going to be an uphill struggle at times. No one is an expert and we all have something to teach each other.
4. **Don't wait to try something new.** Pilot something new once a week, or once a month. You can plan all you want but there will always be results you didn't predict and challenges you didn't plan for. When you have a culture where piloting and trying and testing is the norm, you move out of the place where everyone feels stuck and burned out and hopeless. Nothing about helping dogs is hopeless, but we have to try new things and learn what works. That is what HASS is all about.
5. **Engage everyone in solutions.** Groups of people often left out of leading change are front line staff, young people, people who utilize safety net services, people who surrender pets, and people who live in less affluent communities. What if you turned to these people and invited them to help? What could look different for your organization?
6. **Finally, we have to create a vision for people and pets to live enriching lives together.** Dream big and talk about your vision with others, encouraging everyone to brainstorm and think outside the box. By imagining a better world, one where resources are dedicated first to keeping families together, we can move away from the old system into a new world. You will try and fail, you will sometimes succeed, you will feel like giving up—and then when you see the love between a dog and a person whose bond is preserved, who are staying together thanks to the safety net support you put in place, that will make it all worth it. You will know that you are doing better for animals and people.



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