

I punch in the door code and hear a familiar chorus of barking dogs. Rocky, Lulu, and Garden greet me from their cages, paws hitting against plastic in a high five. As I make my way through the hallway and down to the Cat Lodge, I smile at feline friends like Bing Clawsby and Sadie. Since my last visit, empty cages have been filled with new residents. When I wheel in the “cat cart,” filled with cat food, gloves, toys, and paper towels, the meowing begins instantly as the furry felines realize that it’s finally time for dinner. Making my way around the Cat Lodge, I easily slip into my routine. Open the crate, say hello, scoop some food, pour new water, dust the blankets, and scoop the litter box. Each crate I open has a story within, and often these stories are tragic tales of neglect and abuse. Thankfully, for most cats in my care, it seems like all sadness is forgotten during dinner time. I am greeted with headbutts and purring as I give them their final meal of the day. However, for one cat, this is not true. As I open Wally’s crate, he remains hidden beneath his blankets in his bed. Piercing yellow eyes meet mine as I say hello and continue my routine. Little did I know, Wally had managed to survive through a few traumatizing weeks before arriving at the Hinsdale Humane Society.

When Wally’s owner passed away, he was forgotten and trapped in his apartment. Days, maybe even weeks, passed and Wally had not been fed or cared for. Soon, Wally took matters into his own paws and began to eat through the wall between his apartment and the neighbor’s. Wally’s new life began as his neighbor rescued him and brought him to the Hinsdale Humane Society. At the Hinsdale Humane Society, Wally is being cared for while he waits for a new owner to take him home. However, like many animal shelters across the country, The Hinsdale Humane Society is struggling to provide sufficient resources to the many animals, like Wally, in need in our community.

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Just like Wally, there are many individuals, humans and furry friends, struggling to fulfill their basic needs. In the aftermath of the pandemic, housing insecurity has become a much larger issue. As the median sale price of a single-family home in America jumped 25% from 2019 to 2022, and rent increased 17.6% during 2021, Americans are unable to find affordable and stable housing. However, humans are not the only ones impacted by this struggle for basic necessities. In the period between losing a home and looking for another, homelessness impacts both humans and pets. While 50% of rental housing in America accommodates to pet owners, only 9% does not have any restrictions on the size or type of animal. As owners begin searching for a new home, it is important to consider a pet's needs and to find them a safe place to be relocated. Countless animal shelters across the nation are willing to provide a temporary home for animals. These programs include temporary foster homes, temporary sheltering, and boarding.

Luckily, there are changes being made at the policy level as well. After tens of thousands of animals entered pet shelters in California in 2021, an amendment was made to the Health and Safety Code of California. Last September, a bill was signed into law that required housing developments supported by the Department of Housing and Community Development and Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program to allow residents to keep their pets. This bill also supported the implementation of pet-friendly policies, eliminating breed or weight restrictions on pets, while also putting an end to any monthly pet fees that may be required of tenants. But there is still more to be done.

Pet owners in my hometown, for example, do not have the same protections. I'm currently working on a digital resource for my community that provides information for pet owners facing housing insecurity. Through my website, pet owners who are struggling to care for their furry friends will be able to easily learn about and connect with resources in the area. For

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example, almost all pet shelters and humane societies in my community have a foster program.

Fostering is a huge help for pets who are in between housing as it acts as a way to provide the animal with shelter and care, without the stress that can be brought on in an animal shelter.

Another way for owners to provide care for their pets while looking for a new home is boarding.

While there are fewer places in my community that board animals, this program allows for pets to receive more individualized care as attendants continue caring for pets, with the same food, toys, and beds found in their home, but in a different location. Boarding is an excellent option for pet owners who are nervous about leaving their pet without the same care and attention they receive by their owners. Another important feature that is provided on my website is the location of nearby veterinarians. Some vets offer housing in their establishment, similar to boarding.

These vets are able to provide quality care for animals while their owners are looking for a new home as these vets have been trained to handle emergency situations. However, something my community is lacking in are pet pantries. While there are few in the area, I am working to encourage food pantries in my community to create a section for pets, allowing those struggling with housing insecurity to find provisions for themselves and their pets in one place. By providing knowledge of foster home opportunities, shelters, veterinarians, and pet pantries nearby, while also informing owners of their tenant rights, I am hoping to assist pet owners facing housing insecurity. Three-fourths of American renters have pets. It is critical that we protect the millions of pets around the country by urging local representatives to take action.

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Wally, at the Hinsdale Humane Society.

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