



Lamont Grant hugs his dog, Bandit, at the Sacramento Triage Shelter.
PHOTO BY MAX WHITTAKER COURTESY OF CALMATTERS

Sheltered together

Bill aims to get people off the streets by incentivizing care for companion animals

When police officers found Julie Hemingway bedded down on the asphalt of a Taco Bell parking lot, she wasn't interested in moving to a homeless shelter. No way was she leaving her cat, Tammy.

Caring for Tammy allows Hemingway, who said she suffers from major depressive disorder, to push past thoughts of suicide. "Waking up and having to feed

her," she said, "it's enough to keep me going."

But the officers told her about a triage shelter in Sacramento that would let her keep

Tammy by her side—and see that the tabby was vaccinated, micro-chipped and given her own kitty condo.

"To me, it was lifesaving," Hemingway said, stroking Tammy at the shelter, a collaboration between of Volunteers of America and Front Street Animal Shelter.

"They really helped me."

Most shelters for people experiencing homelessness don't accept pets. But a bill under consideration in the California Legislature aims to make such shelter partnerships more common. Sponsored by Democratic Sen. Bob Hertzberg of Van Nuys, Senate Bill 258 would create \$5 million in state general fund grants for homeless shelters to offer shelter, care and veterinary services to the pets of people staying there.

"If you want to get people off the street—and I see it as an emergency—we've just got to change how we treat people," he said. "Then let's provide a shelter for their pets. It's a small price to pay for a much a larger issue."

A no-pet policy is one of the biggest barriers that keep people away from shelters, he said. In a city the size of Los Angeles, he said, only a handful of homeless shelters accept pets—but those that do are finding it successful.

"I think that people come to us because we allow companion animals," said Stephanie Klasky-Gamer, president and CEO of

LA Family Housing, an organization that provides housing to those without a home. Its shelters include dog runs.

"Sometimes when you are in charge of taking care of somebody else, you do better taking care of yourself," she said. "People step up differently when they're taking care of somebody else."

The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that 5 percent to 10 percent of people experiencing homelessness have pets; other studies suggest the number is even higher. One study of nearly 400 homeless youth using drop-in centers in Los Angeles found that nearly a quarter of those young people had a pet, and that nearly half of them reported that having a pet made it more difficult to find shelter—not to mention long-term housing. Yet those with pets also reported less loneliness and depression than their peers without animal companions.

Within the facilities, animals typically reside in a crate alongside their human partner. The crates protect other residents who may be

afraid of the animals, and help keep the shelters clean.

When speaking to people experiencing homelessness, said Megan Hustings, director of the organization, she often observed people with pets would feed their companions before feeding themselves.

"Pets do become our family members and especially when you're going through a traumatic situation like homelessness," she said. "You're going to rely on those connections because they're usually pretty far and few between."

Pets of the Homeless, a nonprofit based in Nevada, has created a map of resources. Founder Genevieve Frederick said owners typically have dogs, but the organization has also handled 240 cats, plus a bird and a pet pig.

She said she receives a lot of calls from California, and that Hertzberg's bill is an important step.

"This is something that I have been trying to advocate to homeless shelters across the country for years," she said.

Of course, there are challenges. Many residents are used to sleeping with their pets in their arms, and must adjust to putting them in crates near their bunks. Other shelter residents may have allergies, or anxiety around certain breeds of dogs.

And not all shelters are large enough to accommodate animals. "You have to build for that or plan for it, but it's something that's definitely needed," said Christie Holderegger of Volunteers of America.

Still, advocates say the pros outweigh the cons.

"It's absolutely changed my views and beliefs when it comes to homelessness," said Gina Knepp, manager of Front Street Animal Shelter. It was powerful, she said, to see people settle into the shelter who had opted to stay unsheltered for years.

"The most poignant thing was ... seeing light come back into their eyes," she said. "There are real human beings underneath the sadness."

—ELIZABETH CASTILLO


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