

“My dog is my home.”

Name borrowed from organization serving pets of those without shelter, contact information provided.



Summary

The evidence is clear: having a companion animal significantly improves nearly every measure of well-being for people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. The bond is so strong that for many people, their pet is their most stable relationship — a source of emotional regulation, purpose, physical safety, and connection to others.

Most research has focused on dogs, and the findings are especially strong for the human-canine bond. But the benefits of animal companionship extend broadly, and any pet that can be responsibly cared for may provide meaningful support.

This page covers:

- The documented benefits of companion animals for people without stable housing
- The real barriers pet owners face — in shelters, housing, and public spaces
- Practical guidance, including how to qualify a dog as a service animal
- A directory of organizations that can help
- Academic references for advocates and researchers

If you are looking for immediate help, skip to the Provider Directory below.

The Benefits of Companion Animals

Emotional and Psychological Stability

Research consistently shows that companion animals provide measurable psychological benefits for people experiencing homelessness — reducing loneliness, improving emotional regulation, and helping people cope under chronic stress. For individuals living without stable housing, pets often serve as a consistent source of attachment, routine, and purpose in otherwise unpredictable environments.

The physiological effects are well documented: interaction with animals reduces cortisol, increases oxytocin, and improves mood regulation. For people who frequently face trauma and ongoing instability, these effects are especially significant.

Identity, Dignity, and Social Connection

Caring for a pet affirms a person's sense of responsibility, competence, and self-worth. Pets facilitate social interaction, reduce the social stigma often experienced by unhoused individuals, and create informal networks of support within marginalized communities.

In this context, companion animals are not peripheral comforts. They are stabilizing relationships that directly counteract the isolation and dehumanization that homelessness so often brings.

The Unique Role of Dogs

While all companion animals offer benefits, the dog occupies a unique role for people experiencing homelessness — not merely as a pet, but as what researchers describe as a survival partnership. Dogs serve as social icebreakers in a world that often ignores unhoused individuals, provide physical security, and offer vital warmth in harsh conditions.

"Homeless dog owners reported significantly higher emotional closeness to their dogs than dog owners with permanent housing. For these individuals, the dog is often not just a pet but the only stable family member — a lifeline that provides a necessary sense of duty and purpose." — Rullán-Oliver et al., 2022

Biologically, the human-canine bond is built on a unique system of mutual gaze and emotional mirroring — an oxytocin feedback loop that other species do not share in the same way (Nagasawa et al., 2015). This intensity of attachment is a functional necessity for both mental and physical resilience on the street.

Barriers to Pet Ownership Without Housing

Shelter Exclusion

Despite these documented benefits, most emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, and supportive housing environments prohibit pets or offer only limited accommodation. As a result, individuals are frequently forced to choose between accessing shelter and staying with their companion animal.

Research indicates that some individuals decline shelter placement specifically because of pet restrictions — a decision frequently mischaracterized as noncompliance or resistance to services. In reality, it reflects a rational prioritization of attachment bonds and emotional security. Policies that fail to account for companion animals inadvertently contribute to prolonged unsheltered homelessness and reduced service engagement.

Housing and Employment

Pet ownership can also complicate pathways to housing and work:

- Roommate situations — one of the lower-cost housing options — are difficult to access with a pet, as most people seeking roommates prefer pet-free living.
- Full-time employment requires a safe place for your animal during the day — difficult without stable housing.
- Many places where unsheltered individuals can legally stay prohibit animals.

The Legal Landscape

There is no federal, state, or local law in the U.S. that explicitly prohibits a person from owning a pet because they are homeless. Pets are legally personal property, and possession of property is not restricted by housing status.

What does exist are general laws that disproportionately affect unhoused pet owners:

Animal bans in parks, beaches, and public spaces

Cities and counties regulate where animals may be in public — but since unhoused individuals live in those spaces, these rules function as de facto barriers. Examples in Florida:

- Pompano Beach prohibits animals in parks and beaches posted as restricted.
- Fort Lauderdale explicitly prohibits pets on the sandy portion of public beaches.
- Hillsborough County prohibits dogs and cats from running at large on public property, streets, sidewalks, and parks.
- Florida State Parks generally permit pets in designated areas, but with restrictions that vary by location.

Leash, tethering, and animal care laws

These laws apply to everyone but are harder to comply with when living outdoors:

- Most municipalities require dogs to be leashed outside private property. Florida has no statewide leash law — each county sets its own.
- Some counties (e.g., Lee County) prohibit prolonged tethering as part of animal cruelty law.
- Florida law requires adequate food, water, and shelter for animals. This standard is neutral but can be unevenly enforced against people living outside.

Anti-camping and anti-sleeping laws

Increasingly, cities and states have adopted laws that criminalize living outdoors in public spaces. A Florida law effective October 2024 made it illegal for homeless individuals to sleep on sidewalks, parks, beaches, or other public property. If a person cannot legally occupy a space, neither can their pet.

None of these laws say "homeless people cannot have pets" — but together, they create a web of enforcement that disproportionately burdens unhoused pet owners.

Qualifying Your Dog as a Service Animal (ADA)

If you have a mental health condition — such as PTSD, severe anxiety, or depression — your dog may qualify as a Psychiatric Service Dog (PSD) under the Americans with Disabilities Act. This allows the dog to accompany you into shelters, stores, and public buildings where pets are normally prohibited.

Step 1: Train a Specific Task

A service dog must be trained to perform a specific action that helps with your disability. "Providing comfort" alone does not qualify under the ADA — the dog must do something. Examples of tasks you can train yourself:

- **Tactile stimulation (grounding):** The dog leans its weight against your legs or puts its paws on your lap when it senses you are becoming overwhelmed or having a panic attack.
- **Room clearing (Orbi):** The dog enters a dark or unfamiliar room ahead of you to signal it is safe — a common task for people with PTSD.
- **Boundary control:** The dog stands in front of or behind you in a "block" position to create physical space between you and strangers in a crowd.

Step 2: Know the Two Questions

Business owners and shelter staff may legally ask only two questions. Have your answers ready:

- **"Is the dog a service animal required because of a disability?"** Answer: "Yes."
- **"What work or task has the dog been trained to perform?"** Answer: "He is trained to perform deep pressure therapy to interrupt panic attacks" or "She is trained to create a physical buffer in crowds."

Step 3: Meet the Behavioral Standards

A service dog can be legally excluded from a building — even a legitimate service dog — if it fails these requirements:

- **Fully potty trained.**
- **Under control at all times:** on a leash (unless the task prevents it), not barking, lunging, or wandering.

Step 4: Documentation

Keep the following available at all times:

- A current dog license
- A letter from a qualified doctor or mental health provider confirming your diagnosis and the dog's role

Practical Recommendations

For individuals living outside the shelter system, keeping a pet is difficult but not impossible. The following can help:

- **A vehicle changes everything.** If you have access to a vehicle, pet ownership becomes significantly more manageable. See our Living in Your Vehicle section.
- **Share care when possible.** Ideally, a housed person can care for the pet while you are at work. Even two people with different schedules sharing responsibility makes a meaningful difference.
- **Smaller pets are easier.** A smaller animal is less noticeable and easier to transport. The emotional benefits are similar regardless of size.
- **Consider ADA registration.** If you have a qualifying disability, training your dog as a service animal significantly expands where you can go together.

Our Position

The Coalition to End Homelessness strongly believes that pets are among the closest ties many people have, and that homeless services must accommodate them. Pet-inclusive shelter policies, veterinary partnerships,

and temporary foster programs during housing transitions are not merely compassionate — they are evidence-based engagement strategies that improve outcomes.

We actively seek partners to advocate for these policies. As a grassroots volunteer organization, we do not currently have the capacity to run a national advocacy campaign independently — but with support and partners, it would be possible, and it would change lives.

Provider Directory

Information about providers was current as of 2025 but may have changed since then. If you are unable to locate a provider using the information in this directory and are able to Google the correct information please send that information to our website team at info@homelessfl.org.

The following organizations provide pet food, veterinary care, financial assistance, or referrals to people experiencing homelessness with companion animals. Unless noted, services are available to individuals — not just agencies. Always call or email ahead to confirm current availability. These services are usually available anywhere in the U.S. Just because the agency is in another location does not mean they cannot serve you locally.

National Organizations

Feeding Pets of the Homeless

The primary national organization focused on homeless pet owners. Funds emergency veterinary care and connects individuals with local food providers and clinics.

- Website: <https://petsofthehomeless.org/>
- Services: pet food via partner map, emergency vet funding, wellness clinic referrals
- Applications reviewed weekdays 8am–4pm PST

The Street Dog Coalition

Free veterinary clinics for pets of people experiencing homelessness, operating in multiple states through local outreach partnerships.

- Website: <https://www.thestreetdogcoalition.org/>
- Email: info@thestreetdogcoalition.org
- Phone: 970-829-8789
- Services: free vaccines, wellness exams, minor treatments, spay/neuter support in some areas

My Dog Is My Home

National advocacy organization working with shelters and housing agencies to create pet-inclusive policies. Also a useful referral source for individuals seeking pet-friendly shelter options.

- Website: <https://www.mydogismyhome.org/>
- Email: info@mydogismyhome.org

The Pet Fund

Financial assistance for non-emergency veterinary care — helps prevent surrender due to medical costs.

- Website: <https://www.thepetfund.com/>
- Apply online with veterinary diagnosis and estimate

RedRover Relief

Emergency veterinary grants and temporary boarding assistance for pet owners in crisis.

- Website: <https://redrover.org/relief/>
- Apply online; must provide vet estimate and documentation of need

Safe Havens for Pets Directory (Animal Welfare Institute)

National searchable directory of programs that help pets of people experiencing homelessness or domestic violence. Useful for finding local resources anywhere in the U.S.

- Website: <https://awionline.org/content/safe-havens-pets>
- Email: safehavens@awionline.org
- Phone: 202-459-2184

Paws 4 A Cure / The Pet Lifeline Program

Financial assistance grants for veterinary care for pets in need nationwide.

- Website: <https://www.paws4acure.org/>

Florida — South Florida (Miami-Dade & Broward)**The Pet Project for Pets — Wilton Manors (Broward)**

One of the few local grassroots programs providing direct food, supplies, and discounted vet services to pet owners in need in Broward and Miami-Dade.

- Website: <https://www.thepetprojectfl.org/>
- Email: Info@ThePetProjectFL.org
- Phone: 954-568-5678
- Address: 2200 NW 9th Ave, Wilton Manors, FL 33311
- Services: pet food, basic supplies, discounted vet care, delivery for owners in need

Miami Veterinary Foundation — Miami-Dade

Outreach to homeless, abandoned, and low-income pet owners. Runs pet assistance and wellness programs.

- Website: <https://www.miamivetfoundation.org/>
- Email: info@miamivetfoundation.org
- Phone: 305-697-3301
- Services: free/low-cost vet clinics, wellness visits

Miami-Dade WOW (Wellness on Wheels) Mobile Vet Clinic

Free mobile veterinary services traveling to underserved areas throughout Miami-Dade County.

- Website: <https://www.fomapets.org/wow/>
- Email: info@fomapets.org
- Phone: 786-796-7824
- Services: wellness checks, vaccines, basic care

Humane Society of Miami — Pet Pantry

Pet food bank for owners in need — dry and wet food, carriers, and supplies (up to two weeks' worth at a time).

- Check main shelter line for current hours and location

Broward County Animal Care & Control — Pet Food Support

Limited pet food distribution and referrals to additional assistance programs.

- Website: <https://www.broward.org/Animal/Pages/default.aspx>
- Phone: 954-359-1313
- Call to confirm hours and requirements

Additional Broward & Palm Beach Resources

- Kibbelz of Love — West Palm Beach: pet food and supplies (pet must be spayed/neutered)
- Passion for Paws — West Palm Beach: pet food and possible vet referrals
- Tamarac Pet Pantry (Broward): free pet food for income-qualified residents
- Meals on Wheels Broward (seniors 60+): includes pet food support — call to confirm eligibility

Paws 2 Help — West Palm Beach / Jupiter

Affordable general veterinary care for people on tight budgets in Palm Beach County.

- Website: <https://paws2help.org/>
- Phone: 561-712-1911
- Email: Paws.reception@paws2help.org or Jupiter.reception@paws2help.org

Palm Beach County Animal Care and Control

County animal services with pet food bank and referrals to low-cost spay/neuter and vet care.

- Website: <https://discover.pbcgov.org/publicsafety/animalcare/Pages/default.aspx>
- Phone: 561-233-1200
- Address: 7100 Belvedere Rd, West Palm Beach, FL 33411

Florida — Central Florida (Orlando Area)

Project Street Vet — Samaritan Resource Center, Orlando

Free veterinary care for pets of homeless individuals in Central Florida.

- Phone: 407-648-8999
- Address: 800 N Magnolia Ave, Orlando, FL 32803
- Website: <https://www.projectstreetvet.org/>
- Email: val@projectstreetvet.org
- Call ahead to confirm Project Street Vet availability and hours

Florida — Southwest Florida (Fort Myers Area)

P.A.W.S. (Pet Assistance With Supplies) — North Fort Myers

Pet food bank; works with Feeding Pets of the Homeless.

- Phone: 239-652-6722

- Address: 965 Pondella Rd, North Fort Myers, FL 33903
- Call to check current food availability and eligibility

Harry Chapin Food Bank — Fort Myers

Human food bank listed by Pets of the Homeless as a partner provider. Distributes pet food when supplies are available.

- Phone: 239-334-7007
- Address: 3760 Fowler St, Fort Myers, FL 33901

Florida — Palm Bay / Space Coast

Florida Aid to Animals — Palm Bay

Low-cost veterinary care and financial assistance programs for low-income owners.

- Phone: 321-726-1911
- Address: 4700 Babcock St NE #6, Palm Bay, FL 32905
- Website: <https://www.flaidtoanimals.org/>
- Services: low-cost spay/neuter, vaccinations, medical care, financial aid, food referrals

Florida — Statewide

SPCA Florida — Pet Food Assistance Program

Monthly pet food assistance for qualifying community members.

- Phone: 352-378-3498
- Website: <https://www.spcaflorida.org/food-assistance>
- Call to confirm current program details and eligibility

Crucial Care Fund (FVMA Foundation / Frankie's Friends)

Emergency and specialty veterinary care grants for Florida pets. Apply through Frankie's Friends.

- Website: <https://www.frankiesfriends.org/crucial-care-fund>

Shakespeare Animal Fund — North Central Florida (Alachua County)

Emergency veterinary expense assistance in the Gainesville area.

- Website: <https://www.shakespeareanimalfund.org/>
- Email: jwebb.shakefund@gmail.com

EveryPet Pet Food Pantry (First Coast No More Homeless Pets) — Jacksonville

Pet food distribution supporting vulnerable owners in the Jacksonville area.

- Website: <https://www.everypet.org/>

Help Keeping Pets Initiative (Humane Society Tampa Bay)

Free small pet food bags on a first-come basis, plus crisis support.

- Website: <https://humanesocietytampabay.org/service/keep-your-pet/>

Note: Programs listed are independent organizations. Services, eligibility requirements, and availability may change. Please contact organizations directly to confirm current offerings.

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