

Hed: A Paw Up

Subhed: Abuse victims no longer have to leave their pets behind when seeking shelter and support from BrightHouse

By Rachel Hixson

A woman in Hutchinson summons the courage to flee the home where she has endured physical and emotional abuse for years. While she feels some relief at seeking safety for herself, she is distraught because she must leave behind her closest and constant companion, her 5-year-old dog.

She can't find a place that will offer both her and her dog shelter. Her worst fears of leaving her pet behind are realized. Her abuser takes the opportunity to further antagonize her by beating, starving and drugging the dog, texting her graphic photos and videos of the torture.

It's too much for her to take. Within a week she's heading back to the home where she endures more abuse to rescue her canine friend. Thankfully, in the end, both her and her pup escape alive - though bruised and traumatized.

It's a horrible story but one staff at BrightHouse Abuse Support Center hear often - enough that the local nonprofit began expanding its services in October to include support for the pets of abuse victims. The center now offers safe and confidential housing for a wide range of animals, along with food, care and free health services - including treating injuries and providing vaccinations, spaying and neutering and chip implants if necessary. Staff will also help get pets certified as emotional support animals, which can expand future housing options.

And that's just the beginning. BrightHouse - which offers shelter and support services to victims of domestic and sexual violence in Reno, Harper, Kingman and Rice counties - is developing a full-fledged pet support program that aims to provide optimal care for animals and house them very close to their owners staying in the BrightHouse shelter. Executive Director Sue Wray said the center is collecting data to build the most beneficial long-term program.

"We're asking everyone about their needs because what we're doing besides helping is we're trying to assess how much of a need we have," Wray said. "What we need to figure out is do we need a small facility where we can keep them? That would be our ultimate goal - having something near the shelter where we could keep them."

The organization is also working to spread the word that BrightHouse now offers pet support. Wray said a nationwide survey conducted by the National Domestic Violence Hotline and The Urban Resource Institute showed that 50 percent of domestic violence victims won't leave an abusive situation out of concern for their pet's health.

Pam, a BrightHouse victim advocate, said in the past many people have declined help from the center because it couldn't offer shelter for their pet.

“Their pets can be emotional support animals for them, and they just refuse to leave them behind,” said Pam, adding that she can’t blame them because her dog, Hershey, brings her enormous comfort and joy every day.

Since October, Pam has already helped two abuse survivors and their pets transition out of violent environments. She said BrightHouse ensures the animals and their owners have regular and meaningful contact.

“I usually step out and let them have their alone time,” she said, “because I feel it’s very important.”

Wray said there is growing awareness that a lack of pet-friendly domestic violence shelters is a nationwide problem. According to RedRover, a national organization dedicated to rescuing abused animals, only 15 percent of shelters accept pets.

A locally-obtained grant from the The Herman, Esther and Henry Stallman Foundation is supporting development of the pet program, Wray said, but BrightHouse is also taking advantage of resources provided by national programs. She recently completed a day-long webinar offered by the Don’t Forget the Pets national initiative on building an effective pet-friendly program, and is aware of several national organizations offering grants and resources for domestic violence shelters wanting to take in animals.

Pam said in many instances pets are being abused just as harshly as their owners.

“You’re not only taking care of the survivor,” she said. “You’re taking care of those animals too, and letting them know that they’re loved and their owner is still there for them.”

*If you’re interested in helping BrightHouse care for pets or would like to make a donation, call the office at (620) 665-3630 or visit [BrightHouseKS.org](http://BrightHouseKS.org) for more information about the center. BrightHouse offers a 24-hour local crisis hotline at 620-663-2522 and an 800 24-crisis hotline at 1-800-701-3630.*