

Brooklyn Daily Eagle

Pet policy at city shelters keeps homeless New Yorkers on streets. Could that change?

July 2, 2019 Emma Davis



Kathie Brewster, 55, has been separated from her dog, Pinks, while living in a New York City homeless shelter for the past two years. The pair could be reunited through “co-sheltering” legislation from City Council Member Stephen Levin. Eagle photo by Emma Davis

After four years of couch-surfing and sleeping on the streets, Kathie Brewster was finally ready to enter a homeless shelter. But when she tried to check in with her 4-year-old Yorkshire Terrier, Pinks, shelter staff told her, “Absolutely no dogs.”

Brewster found a friend to look after Pinks. Without that help, she said, she would have been forced to walk away from the shelter back in 2017. “I really don’t know where I’d be,” said Brewster, 55, who now has a voucher for permanent housing.

City shelters accept service and emotional support animals, but homeless people with pets face an agonizing choice: give them away, or remain on the streets together.

This plight is the target of new legislation in the City Council, which would require the Department of Homeless Services to track how often shelter residents are separated from their pets and develop a plan to accommodate them.

Proposed by Councilmember Stephen Levin in late March, Introductions 1483 and 1484 reflect the increasing popularity of “co-sheltering” as a solution to human and animal homelessness nationwide. The two bills will be up for a hearing and full council vote in the fall, according to Levin’s legislative director, Elizabeth Adams.

“I introduced these bills because for many people, their pet is their family and where they call home,” Councilmember Levin said. “No one should be forced to leave a member of their family behind.”



Kathi Brewster lives in a Manhattan shelter that bans pets. She misses her dog, Pinks, who stays with a friend in Queens. Eagle photo by Emma Davis

Levin was inspired by the work of Human.nyc, a nonprofit that conducts outreach with the homeless. Human.nyc helped draft the legislation and contributed to a recent New York University study that found pet ownership is one of the main barriers to shelter entry.

“The feeling on the street is that if you have a pet, you’re barred from services,” said Josh Dean, the group’s executive director.

An estimated 10-25 percent of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. have companion animals, according to the organization Pets of the Homeless. In Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx, more than 98 pets were relinquished in the last six months alone due to owners’ homelessness, the city-run Animal Care Centers reported.

“When [people] are coming in, they’re bawling, crying, hysterical,” said Emeri Rodriguez, former assistant admissions manager at the Manhattan ACC. “It is an emotional rollercoaster for clients, because pets are like their children.”

Brewster describes her connection to her Yorkie the same way. Brewster hasn't seen her teenage daughter since moving to New York five years ago, and she said that letting go of her dog would feel like losing another child.

"These animals," Brewster explained, "are like an extension of yourself."

Co-sheltering, a housing approach that keeps pets and people together, has already won the support of the nation's largest provider of domestic violence shelter: the Urban Resource Institute.

In 2013, URI created PALS, or "People And Animals Living Safely," after discovering that nearly half of its clients were staying in abusive relationships to prevent harm to their pets. URI now has animal-friendly accommodations at six facilities, which have allowed more than 100 families to escape domestic violence.

"What's at stake is people's lives, essentially, and their pets' lives," said Carla Smith, chief programs director at URI. "Many people are having to [make that choice] when they can't access shelter."



Six-year-old Pinks receives a free haircut at an event for homeless people with pets. Eagle photo by Emma Davis

The cost of co-sheltering ranges from several hundred to several thousand dollars, according to Emma Newton, executive director of the nonprofit My Dog Is My Home. Building a separate kennel is more expensive, while permitting pets to sleep near their owners can be “as simple as rewriting a couple of policies.”

“In our experience, [shelters] are not inundated when they start accepting pets,” Newton said.

Last year, My Dog Is My Home launched the Co-Sheltering Collaborative to gather data and develop guidelines for providers. The nine-member collaborative held its first event in June, offering free medical and veterinary care, dog training and grooming to homeless pet owners on the Lower East Side.

“New York is the only place I’ve seen a fair like this,” said attendee Kahan Forest, 27, who picked up food and toys for her dog, Loki. “I thought it was really cool.”

However, co-sheltering is likely a low priority for the Department of Homeless Services, said Josh Dean of Human.nyc. The city agency has yet to comment on Levin’s legislation.

“Animals come with their own sets of problems, and DHS is so stretched thin,” Dean explained. “It’s easier for them to just keep it on the backburner.”

The Coalition for the Homeless likewise declined to take a position on the bills, citing the campaign for affordable housing as a “top top priority.”

“Not being able to enter shelter with a pet is just one of the many challenges people encounter when becoming homeless,” policy director Giselle Routhier said via email.



Kahan Forest said her life on the streets would be “a little bit easier, but a little bit lonelier” without her dog Loki. In the meantime, homeless New Yorkers have the option to register their pets as emotional support animals — also called ESAs — which are allowed in city shelters. Matt Wildman, a tenant advocate with the Mayor’s Alliance for Animals, has fielded ESA requests from people entering the shelter system for almost a decade.

“The vast majority of people we could not help,” said Wildman, adding that he has faced “a hard skepticism about co-sheltering” from homelessness nonprofits.

With so many needs for providers to address, “their focus is entirely human,” Wildman said.

Wildman’s clients also struggle with the review period for ESA status, which requires them to enter a homeless shelter for at least 10 days without their pet.

In one case Wildman recalled, a mother and son had lived in a car for months with their dog. To obtain ESA approval, the pair took turns sleeping in the shelter and in the car with their dog.

“The cases I’m seeing, they’re the tip of the iceberg of what people are doing for their animals,” Wildman said.

While Brewster hopes to move into an apartment soon, she is in the process of registering her dog as an emotional support animal.

Sharing her room at the shelter with Pinks “would be so lovely,” she said. “I mean, it would be so much more calming.”

Emma Davis is a reporter and photographer based in New York City. She has previously written for NBC News, The Juvenile Justice Exchange, The Chronicle of Social Change, and Tablet Magazine. Follow her work on her [website](#) or [Twitter](#).
