Homelessness and pet ownership: Loving while living outside

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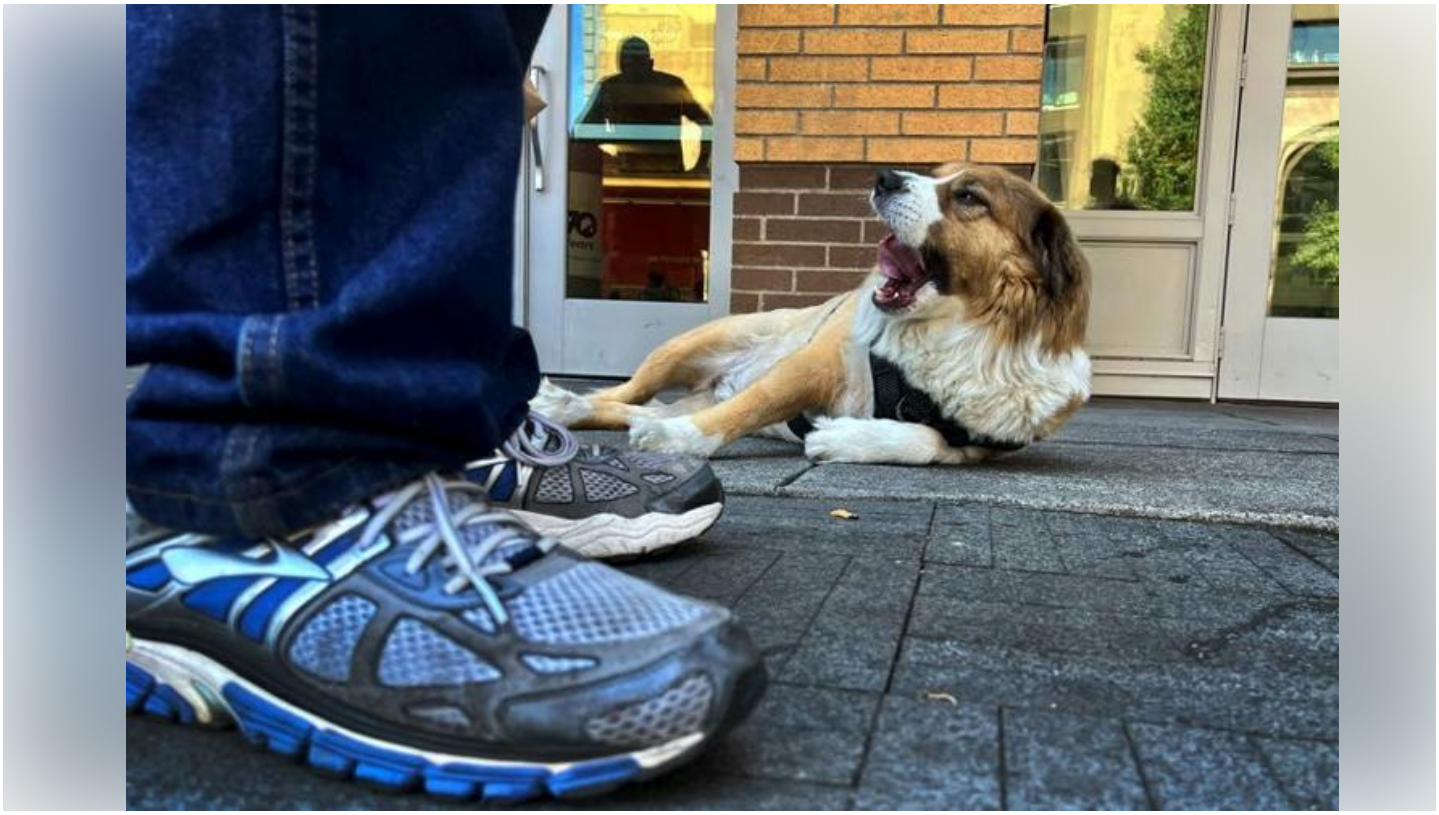

Jason Reynolds says his dog, Bubba, has been a life-saver for him.
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As people finished lunch and made their way outside Blanchet House's free cafe in Old Town, a popular character emerged.

"I hear this one's name is Bubba," said Jon Seibert, director of programs for the homeless service provider. "That is a good name."

"Thank you," replied Jason Reynolds with Bubba, his fluffy dog, dozing beside him on the sidewalk on a late August afternoon.

"Some people come up to me and go, 'Hey, Bubba, how you doing?'" Reynolds says. "And I'm like, 'How'd you know his name?'"

Others leaving the cafe see Bubba and smile. Reynolds, who says he has been homeless for years, agrees to let a couple of people pet him. One man walking by cheerfully says: "It's the lion dog. I love this dog."

Serving people with pets is an everyday reality at Blanchet House. While local governments and service providers in the Portland area have broadened access for different household types over the years, pet ownership can still be a barrier to resources for homeless people.

Grocery stores, restaurants, public transit and other public spaces such as libraries only allow animals if they are service animals or kept in closed carriers. And employment opportunities often can't accommodate pets.

Most overnight shelters in Multnomah County are low-barrier, meaning, among other accommodations, they work to serve people with pets, says Denis Theriault, spokesperson for the Joint Office of Homeless Services.

Policies for pet care and how many pets people can bring in vary by shelter provider. Youth shelters only allow verified service animals — those specially trained to perform certain tasks for people with disabilities — whereas adult, family and domestic violence shelters allow support animals and pets.

It's unclear what proportion of buildings funded by Portland and Metro's affordable housing bonds allow tenants to keep pets — neither government tracks that information.

Aside from the cost of rent, property owners are generally able to set rules for buildings in accordance with local and state laws regarding tenants' rights. Many landlords charge fees for pets and have weight and breed restrictions. Home Forward, the largest provider of affordable housing in

Multnomah County, allows tenants to have pets as long as they sign an agreement outlining behavior expectations.

The inconsistency of pet policies among different resources can be difficult to navigate, says Nicole Perkins, director of development and operations at the Portland Animal Welfare Team.

The nonprofit provides free and low-cost essential veterinary care, including vaccinations, flea/parasite prevention, spay and neuter procedures, medication and management of some chronic conditions, at its clinic on Northeast 82nd Avenue as well as off-site clinics at shelters and resource centers.

People often have trouble obtaining their animals' medical records and other required documentation before accessing certain resources, Perkins said.

"Even if someone's currently able to stay in a transitional shelter with their pet, maybe their case manager has found permanent housing for them, but they now have this very immediate deadline to turn in vaccination records or spay and neuter records," Perkins said.

It's common for people to choose to keep their pets over obtaining housing and giving them away, she said.

"They're family," Perkins said.

Emotional support

Blanchet House started offering pet food with to-go meals at the start of the pandemic when the cafe stopped indoor dining and other resources became more scarce, Seibert said.

It's crucial for Blanchet House to look for ways to make people feel safer, he said. For a lot of cafe patrons, that means caring for their pets, too.

Last month, a veterinarian and long-time Blanchet House volunteer hosted a walk-up clinic outside the cafe alongside a foot care clinic run by nurses from the Harrington Health Clinic and the University of Portland. The hope is both clinics will be offered regularly going forward, Seibert said.

Offering resources to people's pets builds trust, which can make it easier for the nonprofit to help navigate people to other services.

"If you're isolated, it can be really hard to be open and vulnerable with another person," Seibert said. "But having a loving relationship with a pet, that's a safer thing."

The therapeutic benefits of pets are increasingly being . Caring for animals at the Blanchet Farm in Carlton is a key part of the there. "It's a way to work through trauma," Seibert said.

In Multnomah County, 37% of homeless people suffer from substance use disorders, according to the point in time count in 2019 — the most recent year for which there's a full report available for the annual count of homeless people.

For Reynolds, who says he struggles with depression, his relationship with Bubba has been life-saving.

"Without this dog, I'd be gone," Reynolds said. "I would have ended my life if it wasn't for him. If I ever do think about that, he's the first thing that comes to my mind, and I can't do it.

"He can understand me. When I have no one to talk to, he's right there. He makes me laugh. He's my right-hand man."

Reynolds says he cares more about Bubba's needs than his own. But sometimes it's difficult to find dog food, he said. He often has more access to human food, which he gives to Bubba, even though he knows it's not as healthy for him as dog food. Reynolds repeatedly thanked a Blanchet House staff member when she brought out a bag of dog food for him.

Veterinary care is expensive

It's especially difficult to afford veterinary care, Reynolds said.

One time, another dog bit Bubba after the two dogs got into a fight over Bubba's food, Reynolds said. He took Bubba to a veterinarian, who said a bite wound should be stitched, but that the procedure would cost $400. Reynolds said he unsuccessfully pleaded for a cost reduction.

The veterinarian advised Reynolds to come up with at least enough money for painkillers and antibiotics to avoid Bubba developing a serious infection, which he was able to do after friends pitched in, he said.

The demand for low-cost veterinary care in the Portland area far outweighs its supply, Perkins said.

PAW Team's services, as well as its pet supply bank, are generally free. The organization asks clients to contribute financially only when it has to outsource care for some medications and procedures like surgeries, Perkins said.

Annually, PAW Team treats between 1,500 and 2,000 pets on average. No one is turned away because they can't afford care, she said.

"But, at the end of the day, there are always going to be more people reaching out and sometimes we are just at capacity, unfortunately," Perkins said. For efficiency, the organization uses a tiered system of care, screening clients to assess their pets' needs and streamline access.

If PAW Team can't treat something fully and the client can't afford to take their pet elsewhere, the organization advises people of alternative measures to make the pet as comfortable as possible, said Briana Shrode, director of medical services for PAW Team.

"We also do a lot of counseling if a pet is diagnosed with something a person can't handle and we can't manage," Shrode said.

Rising housing instability is apparent in PAW Team's work. While unsheltered homelessness is increasing regionally, the organization has been serving people who are living with a friend or in a car more frequently in recent years, Shrode said.

Additionally, access to temporary emergency boarding can be critical for people if they're incarcerated or suddenly hospitalized, for example. But the capacity of that resource is often very limited, Perkins said.

If shelter space permits, offers temporary emergency boarding. The department also has recently waived impound and boarding fees in part to remove barriers for low-income people to reclaim pets placed in the shelter system, said Jay LeVitre, spokesperson for MCAS.

Judgement, harassment

When she left her husband in Dallas, Texas, two years ago, Nicole Pater said she left with only her phone and her dog, Gypsy, and hasn't had stable housing since.

Gypsy is a registered emotional support dog for Pater, who says she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder from childhood trauma.

She's currently living in a tent in Portland and says people have directed a lot of hatred toward her over having Gypsy.

"People have called me all kinds of nasty names, thrown stuff at me, just because I'm, as I refer to myself, 'houseless'" Pater said.

One time, a man pulled up to her in a car while she was at a crosswalk and asked if she was homeless. Thinking he was asking because he wanted to offer help, Pater said "yes."

The man then started yelling expletives at her and demanded Pater give him Gypsy, she said.

"I said, 'I've had this dog for three years, she's like a child to me,'" Pater said.

He continued to verbally harass her and then drove off, she said.

Shrode, who has 20 years of veterinary experience both in private practice and at PAW Team, says people's housing status doesn't determine the level of care they provide to their pets.

"A lot of our clients are very hyper-aware of the condition of their animal and want to make sure they're OK, sometimes more so than people who have the means to afford veterinary care," Shrode said. "The idea that (income) is the only thing that should determine whether or not someone has companionship is absurd."

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