

# Foster pet program helps in a crisis

By Susan Misur  
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Plenty of people come to the Branford Animal Shelter to surrender pets, but director Laura Burban still recalls one particular woman who gave up her dog.

The woman said she was being abused by her husband, as were her two children and their dog. Finally deciding to leave him, she had nowhere for her pet to go.

"She was facing the devastation of not only leaving her abuser and home, but losing her dog as well. She may have also had to live in a shelter for awhile, and she couldn't take the dog there," Burban said.

The family pet is often an overlooked victim of domestic violence and family crises.

But it's a dilemma Shoreline resident Annie Chittenden is trying to eliminate with a new foster program called CT SafePet, which provides temporary care for pets of people facing crisis situations or long-term hospital stays. There is currently no other initiative like it in Connecticut, though other states have their own versions.

The animals live in the home of a SafePet volunteer for a few months, and owners get animals back when they move and find a new place to live, in the case of violence, or come home from the hospital if they've had an extended stay.

As the economy worsens, domestic violence and family crises are increasing, and so is the need for temporary pet care, Chittenden said. Her group cares for cats, dogs,

small caged animals and even horses and farm animals.

In violent situations, pets "are very powerful weapons because very often, for people in these abusive relationships, their animals are the only reliable, trustworthy relationships they have," Chittenden said. "So it's very common for an abuser to threaten animal abuse without carrying it out as a means of keeping the victim under his or her thumb."

The animal rescue program was officially active starting in May, said Chittenden, who quit her job in the behavioral health field to run SafePet.

She said statistics about animals and domestic violence

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Annie Chittenden at home with her rescued dog, Tillie, a cocker spaniel, who is not part of the CT SafePet program.

## Safe pets: Animals can be victims of domestic violence, too

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alarmed her. Studies show that up to 75 percent of domestic violence victims report that their partners have threatened or killed pets, while between 18 and 48 percent of battered women delay leaving abusive situations out of fear for their pets' safety.

"I figured if I could get these services in place, it would help these women get out of their homes sooner and more safely," Chittenden said.

Burban said the program is a "great idea."

"The other animal control officers here have talked to women who've been abused and had to give up their dogs. One officer kept one of the dogs and still has it," she said.

But, Chittenden's program will also be helpful for anyone, especially the elderly, who face extended stays at hospitals or rehabilitation facilities.

"That's just not the time people

group Our Companions, the staff of which helps traumatized pets acclimate into Safe Pet foster homes. Chittenden talks to social workers and other referral agents, takes applications from those agents and their clients, matches animals with appropriate foster homes, and transports the pets to foster parents.

All services are free, but those who apply for them must be receiving social or medical services and have a social worker or agent they are working with to prove the need. The animals receive vet care by SafePet before entering a foster home and must also be spayed or neutered; if they aren't, the owner must agree to the surgery.

There are currently 12 foster homes across the state and four veterinarians who see SafePet animals. The average stay at a foster home is 60 days, though extensions can be granted, Chittenden said, and seven animals have been fostered so far, though

To transport animals, Chittenden gives them to foster parents at a safe meeting place, rather than at home.

While animals are in foster care, Chittenden provides updates to their owners so they can still feel connected to the pets and know they're safe.

One foster parent, who identified herself only as Ellen from New Haven County, has fostered three dogs and called Chittenden's initiative "long overdue."

Ellen, who owns two dogs herself, said of fostering, "It's as simple as dropping an extra bowl on the floor. After a couple days, you just go on with your regular routine."

She said she takes active dogs that may need more attention since her family enjoys spending time outside. Since the foster situation is temporary, it means her family can help a great deal of dogs and their owners, she added.

Leslie Krumholz, program director of Guilford's Women

ing a pet behind, some people might not leave" a violent situation, Krumholz said. "This might even help encourage more women to leave, if they know their pet is going to be OK."

For information on making monetary donations or fostering for CT SafePet, call 860-242-9999 ext. 322 or visit [ourcompanions.org](http://ourcompanions.org).