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TAWNIE WILSON | SBJ

Humane Society of Southwest Missouri employees Gay Morton and Caroline Thomas check over a black lab puppy surrendered to the shelter.

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# Animal shelters hit hard by knock-on effects of affordable housing crisis

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Good Pizza Co. settled into a semipermanent home at Metro Eats; Trinity Electric Co. was acquired; and Cantrell Real Estate relocated.

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**BY: KRISTI WATERWORTH, CONTRIBUTING WRITER**

Posted online January 31, 2025 | 2:50 pm



(/uploads/original/20250131-144705-25f-bowling-marci-mug.jpg)

Marci Bowling estimates it costs \$1,500 a year to care for a cat.

It's no secret the entire nation has been facing a housing affordability crisis for years, and while the impact to local homebuyers and renters has been dramatic, a lack of affordable housing is also impacting the area's pets.

According to a 2023 housing study commissioned by the city of Springfield by Atlanta-based APD Urban Planning Management, 58% of Springfield's households were renters in 2021, and 73% of

those households would be cost burdened at market rents. When monthly pet rent fees and increased deposits are added to the mix, the story becomes one of real struggles for local animal shelters and pet owners.

Although there isn't data available for local pet owners, Michaelson Found Animals Foundation Inc.'s Pet-Inclusive Housing Initiative did a nationwide study in 2021 in which 72% of pet owners report that pet-friendly housing was hard to find and 59% of pet owners said that pet-friendly rentals are simply too expensive. Due to these factors, 14% of surveyed pet owners surveyed admitted to having surrendered their pets.

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“Often some of the very first things cited when someone is either trying to find housing or moving are either that there’s no pets allowed, or the pet fees and rent are so high they can’t afford them when they move,” said Marci Bowling, founder and executive director of cat rescue Watching Over Whiskers. “We are getting several calls from people that are on the struggle bus that can’t handle a new \$500 or \$600 pet deposit. A lot of places seem to be adding pet rent, which can be \$10 to \$20 a month per pet.”

When this happens, pet owners are often faced with difficult decisions. Rentals can be hard to find in some price ranges, giving owners few options besides returning their pets to the rescues from which they came.

“When people are moving and they need to return an animal, it’s typically one that they’ve had for less than a year,” said Rob Hardy, communications manager at CARE Animal Rescue. “However, we have seen situations where someone is moving and they’ve had an animal for 8 or 10 years and they still need to return that animal. It’s sad to see the return of some animals where they have been in a family for an extended period of time. You can tell that the owners don’t want to return the animal, but they have their back against a wall, and that’s the only option that they have.”

Returns are a serious problem for local rescues and shelters, officials say, but they’re not the only issue. Due to the increased cost of owning a pet, shelters are also seeing a significant drop in adoptions, too.

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“Ever since the pandemic, there have been a lot more people trying to surrender animals and a lot fewer animals getting adopted,” said Alex Heath, population supervisor at the Humane Society of Southwest Missouri. “We have seen a huge decrease in adoption numbers, especially with dogs. Due to this, our intake numbers have actually decreased, because we cannot take in as many animals since our animals are staying so long.”

How long is long? According to Heath, length of stays for dogs are unprecedented. “Since COVID, our dogs’ length of stay has tripled. It used to be 50 days on average that they would stay here. It’s now 150 days that they’re usually in the shelter.”

Heath said that intakes for 2024 reached just 844 dogs, well below 2019’s 1,432, but considering that dogs are staying three times longer, it’s a lot more dogs to take care of over a longer period.

This also means that it’s much harder to surrender an animal, should it come to that for families. Heath reported that waitlists for large dogs are so long that they can’t even predict when a spot will open, because another dog has to go out to a home for one to come in to the shelter, and large dogs have been the hardest to place with families. But even owners of small dogs and cats who are making impossible choices often have to wait two months or longer to give up their friends.

In the last six months, Heath reports that there have been over 1,600 requests to surrender pets. Older data isn’t available, but that averages about

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267 requests per month, many of which are for litters of kittens or puppies, or other situations involving multiple animals.

All this pressure on the system is only growing. Bowling describes it as a tidal wave, threatening to crush the entire industry. She said rescues will always take animals back when they can, but it's hard to help people who can't wait on long lists for their pet to be returned to the rescue.

For Watching Over Whiskers, the overall numbers are smaller due to both their screening process and the size of the rescue, but still exponentially larger overall. For example, in 2019, they had just one returned animal – but in 2024, they had 23. Like the Humane Society, Bowling reports that she gets far more requests for owner surrenders than she can fulfill due to how long animals are now staying in her care.

“It's breaking people, it's breaking rescues,” said Bowling. “Traditionally, rescues have in their contract to return the dog or cat to them if you are unable to care for said pet. We don't want you to randomly give an adopted pet away on a street corner in the Walmart parking lot to a stranger. I mean, if we've carefully helped you select this pet for your family, your lifestyle, and your cat experience or your dog experience, the last thing we want you to do is give it away to a stranger that you don't even know.”

Instead of a pet being adopted to an unvetted stranger, rescues are trying to find more ways to keep pets in their homes with the people who love

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them. Watching Over Whiskers, for example, does financial counseling with potential adopters before they are allowed to adopt a cat, in order to help them avoid any surprises down the road.

“We’ve done pen to paper and it’s roughly \$130 to properly care for a cat every month, between canned food, dry food, flea and tick meds and litter,” said Bowling. “It’s important for me that we don’t give you something that is going to be a financial burden. We don’t want people to find themselves so financially stretched by adding a pet to their family that it puts them in a bind in other ways.”

Once you have the pet, though, surprises can erupt that no one could have planned for, like a further increase in the cost of housing or pet supplies. This is when more help may be needed, and larger rescues can do even more for the community to keep animals in their homes and out of area shelters. Cooper Clinic at the Humane Society of Southwest Missouri, for example, can help a pet owner stretch their budget further with affordable care options for their pets.

“We get a lot of people coming to our vaccine clinics and wanting to get into our vet clinic because it is low cost, and they have made mentions that they can’t afford vet care at any other place because it is so expensive these days,” said Heath. “If we can get these pet owners low-cost vet care, maybe then they can keep their pets and they don’t end up in our shelter, right?”

The Humane Society also maintains a pet food pantry that can help pet owners who are stretched by rising housing costs continue to feed their pets and keep them in their homes.

In the case a pet needs routine preventative care before a landlord will allow them to move into a new home, assistance is available for that, too.

“There have been some situations where a pet needs to be spayed or neutered or vaccinated, and assistance has been found either through us or through another organization to get those procedures done,” said Hardy. “If financial reasons are why you might need to surrender your pet, reach out to multiple rescues. There might be ways to get assistance in vetting, to get assistance with food, any other thing that you might need, because our goal is to keep animals in the homes.”

Despite the heavy load that increased housing costs have placed on local animal rescues and shelters, officials say they are doing the best they can to stay ahead of Bowling’s tidal wave.

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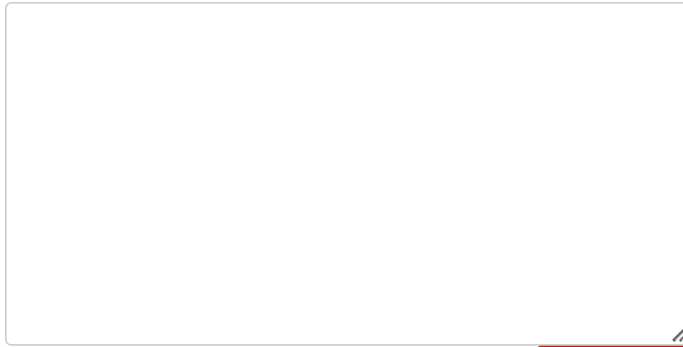
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Phone: (417) 831-3238  
Fax: (417) 864-4901  
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