

Helping Pet Families in Need

Alicia Obando details how and why she created a nonprofit to provide families with the tools, knowledge and support needed to care for or keep their pets, with the aim of keeping more pets in loving homes

I started my professional career as a child and family therapist almost 30 years ago. Even though my career would take many twists and turns since then, there was one thing I always knew for sure. I wanted to help families in need. In 2001, I started to attend vacations twice a year at Camp Dogwood in Lake Delton, Wisconsin. Camp Dogwood offers an amazing experience where your dogs vacation with you, and you all get the opportunity to learn a host of new things and meet all kinds of dog loving people. I developed a newfound love of all things dog, which led me to quit my well-paid job and go to work at an animal shelter in the Humane Education department. This was followed by several years in administration at a specialty veterinary hospital. In both these pet care jobs, I would often see families with limited resources having to make heart-wrenching decisions to give up their pets. This was mostly due to financial hardship, but also because of a lack of pet care education and a lack of knowledge about the resources that existed in the community.

By this point in my profession, I had become quite familiar and active with the pet care and rescue organizations around my city of Chicago, Illinois. I saw that there were lots of organizations helping find homes for homeless pets. This was great work done by mostly unpaid, hard-working volunteers. Even though so many of us were working towards this cause of helping homeless pets, it seemed like it would be a never ending battle. I started thinking that maybe instead of helping the animals once they became homeless, I should try to help them from becoming homeless in the first place. This required helping the families while they still owned their pets.

I had once supervised a program at a social service agency called Intensive Family Preservation Services. In this program, we helped families keep their children, after a finding of neglect, by providing the family with intensive services, rather than removing the child. This was



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For many, a pet dog is an important family member; as such people are often reluctant to have to relinquish them due to a change in circumstance or limited resources

a very effective model for those families that just needed some help to go in the right direction. These were parents that loved their children and children that needed to stay with their parents, rather than be traumatized by the separation from them.

This family preservation model is what I used for the nonprofit I created, Pets Are Like Family (PALF). PALF's mission was to help Chicago pet parents have a loving, responsible relationship with their pets by providing education, resources, counseling, and referral services to keep pets with their families and decrease pet homelessness. We provided free Pet Care 101 workshops in neighborhood parks and also ran a pet care hotline where people could call with any pet care questions they had. Usually the questions were about where they could receive free pet food or low cost vet assistance, so we created a directory of these services. The website was also an educational tool full of pet care information and resources. I ran a pet pantry out of my basement and we subsidized the cost of vaccines, spay/neuter surgeries and microchips.

Home Based Care

Providing the education, the resources and the pet care referrals were all critical to helping families care for their pets, but the most important thing I think we did was the home based counseling service. As I had learned years before in social services, providing home-based care for families in need is very effective for many reasons. First of all, it is easier for the clients to attend their sessions. There's no need to find childcare,

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secure transportation and try to get to an appointment on time. Families with limited resources often find it difficult to follow through with services because of these obstacles, so home-based counseling increased compliance. Families also felt more comfortable and less vulnerable in their own homes rather than in someone else's office, which led to more trusting relationships. And lastly, by going into the family's home, you get to use your own observational skills to see what the needs are. You get to see the pets, their interactions with their humans and the environment they live in with your own eyes rather than rely on what the family is telling you. Often, the family isn't aware of what all the needs are. They may call you for pet food, but when you get there you see that the dog is obese, or has an injury, or is being treated inappropriately by a family member. Then you can provide assistance for all the needs that you see.

I delivered pet food to our clients once a month, which allowed me to put my eyes on the pets and their situations regularly so I could track their progress. To be accepted into the program, the pets had to be spayed or neutered, up-to-date on their shots, and microchipped. These were all services that we paid for, so the client just had to agree to them, and they almost always did so, happily.

Even though running this nonprofit organization as a volunteer outside my full-time job was very time consuming and often stressful, those home visits with our clients were what made it all worthwhile. I built relationships with these people who were so grateful that someone cared enough about them and their pets to give of their time and resources. Many of the families that we helped were Spanish speaking immigrants and they really appreciated getting this help in their own language, as I

am bilingual. Some of these special relationships lasted for years.

We helped families with children, young adults with their first pet, and seniors. The pets owned by these families meant the world to them, which is why they were seeking help and willing to do what was necessary to get that help. PALF was not just about helping pets, but it was about helping people. For many, especially seniors, their pets were not just animals, but important family members. A lot of seniors live isolated lives due to finances, physical limitations, and family members that just didn't come around much anymore. For these seniors, their pets help them not feel so alone. If they have a dog, it helps them get out into the world. No matter what, their pets let them know that they are loved, which is a basic need I believe we all share.

After five years of running PALF, I closed it down at the end of 2015 as it was just too difficult for me to keep it going. It was hard to see it come to an end, but I was also so happy to see that the idea of helping families keep their pets was now being implemented in organizations all around Chicago and the country. Various organizations have started to realize that it's not just about helping animals, but it's also about helping people become better pet parents by educating and providing assistance and not just rushing to pass judgment and taking pets away. This is how we can help end pet homelessness, one goal we can surely all get behind. ■

Alicia Obando is a child and pet care educator with a Bachelor's in early childhood education and a Master's in counseling children and adolescents. She has worked on behalf of children and families for over 30 years and in the animal welfare arena for over 15 years, recently becoming certified as a pet loss counselor. In 2015, she started her Chicago company, Pitter Patter Parenting (pitterpatterparenting.com), where she offers pet care, education and support to help families manage kids and pets together safely, while honoring the bond that people have with their pets. She works with families individually in their homes, and also teaches pet safety classes to children and expectant parents at various locations around the Chicagoland area.

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