

Women's shelter opens doors to pets

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Harrington House recently received a grant from Pacific Power that has enabled them to upgrade the pet area it offers to domestic violence abuse victims who seek shelter.

Harrington House is one of the only shelters that accepts pets in Northern California, helping to provide accessibility to more people, especially those who don't want to leave their pets behind.

By accepting pets, Del Norte County's only domestic violence shelter makes it easier for people to leave an abusive situation

It takes survivors an average of seven attempts at leaving an abusive relationship before leaving for good, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline. A beloved pet can be a huge barrier. That's because leaving an abusive situation often requires leaving one's dog or cat behind.

Fortunately, Del Norte County residents have a better option. Harrington House, the only domestic violence shelter in this county of 28,000 people, is the rare shelter that allows survivors to bring their cats, dogs,

lizards and birds with them when they need support and a safe place to stay. It's one of only eight shelters in California to do so, says shelter manager Sherry Hertz.

The backyard where pets run and play recently got upgraded with new equipment, thanks to a recent safety and wellness grant from Pacific Power Foundation. The backyard is now equipped with four dog houses, six pet beds and a large outdoor sunshade to protect animals from Crescent City's wet, windy weather. Harrington House receives state and federal funding and also relies on donations from businesses and individuals.

By accepting pets, and thereby removing one of the reasons why someone may remain in an abusive situation, Harrington House hopes to drive down the historically high rates of domestic violence in Del Norte County.

Rates increased during the COVID pandemic, from 49 instances of domestic violence per 1,000 residents in 2019 to 80-some instances per 1,000 residents in 2020, Hertz says. Even with the pandemic fading, calls to the domestic violence hotline rose from 42 in March of this year to 62 in April.

Harrington House and its crisis hotline (707-465-3013) are open and staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. The 9,000 square-foot shelter and resource center can house up to 30 people and their pets. Smaller animals can even stay with guests in their rooms. Most of the guests are women, many with children, although men are also welcome.

The shelter offers a wealth of resources, including food and emergency clothing, counseling for adults and children, legal services, and support groups. Many advocates who work at the shelter are survivors themselves who provide support and hope for people so that they can move past their trauma and on to better, healthier lives.