

Safe Beds Report 6/10/2023

Prepared by Andrea Dawkins



Community Services Manager

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Companion animals are not just pets; they're integral family members for many, offering comfort, love, and emotional support. In Australia, most households cherish these bonds, predominantly with dogs and cats. However, unexpected events like hospitalisations, homelessness, or natural disasters can strain these bonds, sometimes resulting in heartbreaking decisions like surrendering or even euthanising these pets. In Tasmania, this is no different with thousands of calls each year made to police and others in community services for assistance. Amidst this chaos, companion animals act as beacons of hope, bringing warmth, companionship, and a sense of purpose. They often offer solace, reducing feelings of isolation and combating depressive tendencies. Research shows that people stay in violent and abusive relationships because they fear for their companion animals. A woman's decision to leave a violent and abusive relationship is a complex process. Since the program's inception in 2021, we have been at the table with a number of the women accessing our program, giving them the support they plan to flee a violent situation, knowing that we will meet them and take their animals into care.

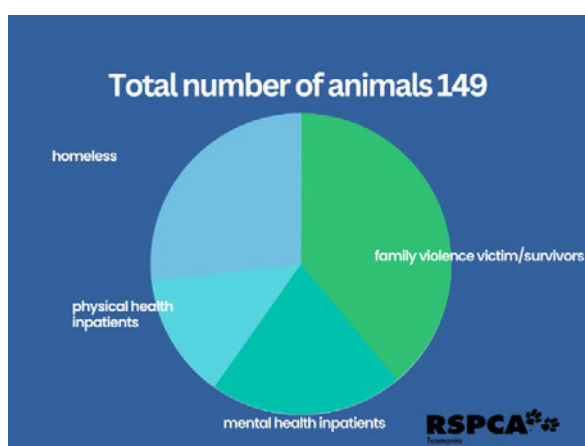
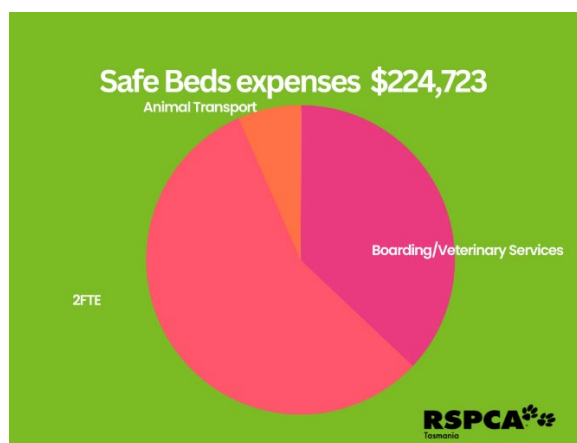
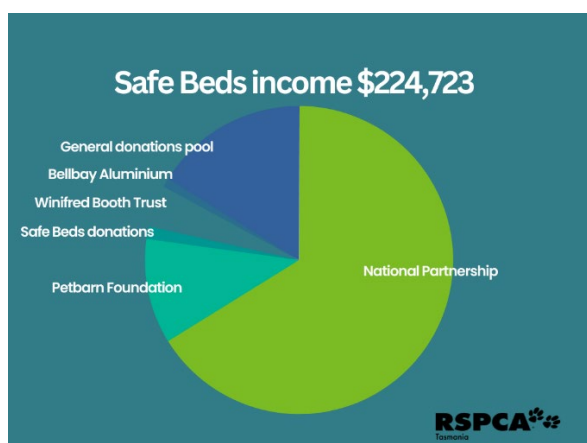
Generally, interim housing does not accommodate the companion animals of those fleeing domestic violence and when it does, we are often called to assist support workers with appropriate care for the animals as they too suffer the trauma of experiencing or witnessing abuse. In the 22/23 financial year, we worked with 33 agencies, including the Tasmanian Health Service, taking care of 149 companion animals belonging to 117 homeless or hospitalised people. Of those clients, 37 people told us they needed our help due to being homeless because of family/domestic violence, with 62 animals needing care. The length of stay for animals was between 2 and 321 nights, with the length of stay for the animals belonging to domestic/family violence victim/survivors being at the longer end of the scale due to the well-documented priority housing wait list being over 4,000 people in Tasmania.

To add depth to our program, we have recently employed a part-time Community Awareness Officer, with animal care and community service experience. The aim of this role is to foster collaboration between the social services sector and animal welfare to break down the siloes between our sectors. Our Community Awareness officer is working with the University of Tasmania (UTAS) on Safe Beds internships as well as igniting a debate on how the social services sector can broaden its responsibility to wrap its services around vulnerable companion animals as we are with victim/survivors. Our contacts in the Social Work Department at the university seem as passionate as we are about this opportunity, with our first social work internship placements earmarked for early 2024. We have also been asked to feed our experiences into the curriculum with the aim of breaking the siloes.

The program was presented at the Safe Equal Respected Conference hosted by the Women's Legal Service in Launceston in June 2023 and receives regular media attention for its unique offering. RSPCA Tasmania has recently collaborated with the State Emergency Service and municipal managers on a project called READY,PET,GO! which aims to give people with companion animals the tools to prepare for emergency evacuations. We now aim to broaden that project to assist people experiencing domestic/family violence to do the same, understanding that in the chaos of leaving important documents and animal supplies can be far from the top of the list of essential items.

For the 2022/2023 period, our income was derived from several sources, with the Tasmanian government providing grant funding through the National Partnership on Family/Domestic Violence Responses. Our founding partners, Petbarn Foundation came on as naming partners at the program's inception in 2021. Working with a diverse number of community services organisations has proven challenging but fruitful for our very small team. No one in the organisation has the sole responsibility for this program but we work across responsibilities understanding that Safe Beds clients cannot wait for our tasks to be cleared to receive our attention. We have found that Safe Beds clients not only need a foster home or boarding facility for their animals but as our policies determine that all animals must be vaccinated and desexed, we often have preliminary tasks that need to be completed before we can safely house animals. Boarding facilities and foster carers must be informed of the safety requirements for housing the animals belonging to people coming out of abusive situations to ensure that the animals' whereabouts are confidential. We have the necessary experience to manage this delicately and the training to keep our team safe.

Safe Beds Snapshot



Safe Beds Testimonial

[REDACTED]

Andrea Dawkins
RSPCA - Safe Beds Program
PO BOX 66
Mowbray TAS 7248

Dear Andrea,

I just wanted to take the time to write to you and the team to thank you from the depths of our hearts for the support the RSPCA Safe Beds program have provided for our family while we are experiencing difficulties with homelessness and domestic violence.

From the moment we made contact we could be confident our [REDACTED] would be looked after, your worker [REDACTED] was really warm and responsive to my very anxious children. Our animals are definitely part of our family, in fact they are our therapy animals. Without this support it would have been a much harder experience for the children especially and I doubt they would have ever forgiven me or come willingly knowing we couldn't take our animals with us.

Thank you for the regular updates on [REDACTED] and keeping in touch about changes as they happen, we feel we are kept in the loop which helps with anxiety and allowing helplessness to creep in while under so much stress. We are so pleased to hear the babies are been matched with good homes and can begin the next chapter of their lives, and that Panda will not be having any more happy accidents with his pen mates.

When we are back on our feet and have a sense of stability again we'd love to be able to help with your program, too. It is honestly essential. What do we need to do to skill up and apply?

I haven't told you this but around 7 years ago my little sister [REDACTED] died. She couldn't leave her cats to seek refuge in a shelter and as a result was tragically a victim of domestic violence. Of course if I knew I would of helped however so often the nature of this situation isn't always known or talked about openly. So I am passionate to see your work continue and will do whatever I can to help your program. We are aware we could have also been part of these statistics, too. No one is immune to domestic violence and people need all the help they can to help their family, including animals, access safety and supports, which so sadly can't accommodate or support animals.

We are so incredibly grateful, please pass on our thanks to the team for their care and understanding, especially with the extra complexities of relocating the animals so they aren't adopted and used against us by my ex partner.

Kind regards,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The client who wrote that letter escaped domestic/family violence without a caseworker or any agency support. We were one of the first agencies she contacted. The animals mentioned here a pocket pets, including one animal in advanced stages of pregnancy. We took care of those animals for 6 months in total, neutering the male and finding homes for the offspring. During that time there was a large aging dog with numerous health issues belonging to the same family needing our program. This animal was a complex case, requiring specialised care due to their age and breed.

As the months drew on and no alternative home became available to the client and her children, we felt her struggle deepen. That played out for us by needing more updates and photos. We are privileged to be able to offer that kind of reassurance to our clients, with our only goal being reuniting people with their animals. It was over a year between this client becoming homeless due to family/domestic violence and all her animals being returned to her. She had a reentry to Safe Beds during this time. Transporting the animals to their new home is the second last action we commit to as we check in for the first two weeks after they exit the program to ensure the client is comfortable and the animals are adjusting.

These are the stories we see played out over and over again. We attempt to categorise our clients for the purpose of data collection and grant acquittals but as there is so much crossover between mental ill-health, domestic/family violence and homelessness and caring for the animals is our core deliverable, we can only rely on the information we are given, without pressuring agencies or clients for further information.

Using this approach, the RSPCA can provide a place for our clients to be in control and authoritative. They know their animals needs more than anyone. We ensure that as much as possible, our clients are informed partners in the program.

The following testimonial is from a client with historical abuse leading to an admission at the Royal Hobart Hospital. This visit helped the client by showing her her animal was safe and that we were on her side during her ordeal.

We continue to use all avenues to advocate for families and their companion animals to stay together during periods of upheaval.

For further information, please don't hesitate to contact RSDPCA Tasmania on 03 6709 8100, or Andrea Dawkins 0438 346 445

To whom it may concern,

I recently sent a request to the RSPCA.

One of our patients requested, her dog in Foster Care with the RSPCA, visit her in hospital.

The RSPCA were happy to help.

Firstly, I would like to say thank you for your assistance.

The visit made an enormous difference to this lady's extended stay.

For her to see her dog was happy, very well cared for, safe and well-loved was the perfect therapy.

I offered this lady a visit from our therapy dog service but her reply was "I just want to see my own dog".

And there is no better medicine than your own fur baby.

So a very big thank you for being able to facilitate this visit as it made a world of difference.

I could also see the benefits to the dog.

It was wonderful to see the RSPCA put the needs of the dog first. I valued this very much.

It is so important when bringing animals into a hospital environment they are safe and their well-being is managed.

People often do not understand the needs of animal entering such a facility.

For dogs, hospitals environment are busy, smelly, noisy and always unpredictable.

There are lifts, bright lights, unusual smells and always lots of strangers.

In this situation the dog was very happy and appear very relaxed.

So a positive experience for the patient and the dog.

Well done!

It makes such a difference to patients to have their 'fur family' to cuddle, particularly for those with limited or no family.

I am the coordinator of our Animal Assisted Therapy program at the Royal Hobart Hospital

I understand the importance of the Human-Animal Bond and the power of healing.

I have witnessed, first hand, the enormous effect pets have on their humans, their recovery and their motivation to get better.

Pets can:

- lower blood pressure and heart rate
- relieve loneliness, boredom and prevent depression
- relieve anxiety and distract from pain
- encourage patients to engage in their rehabilitation goals
- give us a reason to get up each day
- foster communication amongst strangers
- encourage patients to keep going and stay positive

I do hope the RSPCA will continue to provide us with assistance to bring foster dogs to see their owners.

Kindest regards,

Erica

Erica Stevenson
Diversional Therapy Program Coordinator
Diversional Therapist

Occupational Therapy Department
Royal Hobart Hospital
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