

ANIMAL RESCUE

# SPACES FOR CARING

Group Opens Pet Training Center, Starts Second Phase Of Sanctuary

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It took Our Companions Animal Rescue 10 years and some trying fund-raising times in a bad economy to raise \$1 million to build the first phase of its animal sanctuary in Ashford.

The first building at the sanctuary opened last October. Just six months later, the organization, which seeks to end homelessness for dogs and cats, has already raised the \$650,000 needed for phase two of the project and is poised to begin construction on two more buildings.

"We just finalized the architectural plans and will be starting construction in

the next couple months," said Susan Linker, CEO of Our Companions.

The organization has also finally moved its longtime headquarters from Linker's Bloomfield home — where meetings often took place in her basement office and dog training sessions were held in the driveway — to a 6,000-square-foot facility in an office and industrial park in Manchester near I-84.

The new training center will allow the organization to recruit and train more volunteers, offer a variety of classes to help pets and owners stay together and offer training for dogs that enables them to be adopted instead of going into shelters.

"In most cases our goal is to save the home, but sometimes it's just not the right home for the dog," said Linker, adding that often owners change their minds about giving dogs up after they have had an opportunity to change problem behaviors and learn dog-handling skills.

Among the classes Our Companions plans to offer at the new center: training therapy dogs; working with reactive dogs; and foster parenting.

"I don't know of another organization doing this much work with behavior," Linker said. "But that's the problem."

The organization is also poised to begin a trap, neuter and release program for

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# Companions

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feral cats, which it hopes will help reduce the population of unwanted felines that can be a nuisance to communities when left unchecked.

Bloomfield Animal Control Officer Chris Sparks applauded Our Companions for its work locally in identifying colonies of feral cats and alerting her to families that

are having a difficult time caring for their animals. She was also encouraged by the training programs they are offering.

"There are no organizations like Our Companions," Sparks said. "Their dedication to animal issues is limitless."

Linker said the organization is learning on the job.

The first building currently houses both dogs and cats. When the next two buildings are finished, they will house only dogs, and the first building will then be dedicated to cats. The maximum number of animals housed in the buildings at one time will

also be lowered.

The organization will hold monthly adoption events at the Manchester training center. Some adoption events have already been held at the sanctuary. It is also constantly working to improve matching of animals to people in order to keep them from coming back as a result of failed adoptions.

Linker said the success of Our Companions is the result of long-term planning, a conservative approach by the board of directors and a pool of about 2,000 generous donors who have made it pos-

sible for the organization to sustain an annual operating budget that has grown to \$650,000.

"We don't build anything without cash in hand," Linker said. "We have no debt. We don't owe anyone."

Valerie Friedman, chairwoman of Our Companions' board of directors, said fiscal responsibility and long-range planning is a key component to keeping the organization solvent and donors on board.

"It's a great business model as well as wonderful work," Friedman said. "We take it one step at a time."

"There are no organizations like Our Companions. Their dedication to animal issues is limitless."

**Bloomfield Animal Control Officer Chris Sparks**



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**JANE GOODELL**, of West Hartford, gives her dog Cooper a command as she holds a treat during a dog therapy training session hosted recently by Tails of Joy in Manchester. Our Companions Animal Rescue and Tails of Joy collaborate on dog training classes. Among the classes that Our Companions plans to offer at its new Manchester training center are: training therapy dogs, working with reactive dogs and foster parenting.