



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: Friday, April 3, 2026.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. Contact [Gage Harter](#) with any questions.

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Loudoun County

Program Title: LEASH- Loudoun Emergency Animal Safe Haven

Program Category: Health and Human Services

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Monica Spells

Title: Deputy County Administrator

Signature: Monica N. Spells

Digitally signed by Monica N. Spells  
Date: 2026.03.25 20:38:40 -04'00'



# LEASH

## LOUDOUN EMERGENCY ANIMAL SAFE HAVEN PROGRAM

2026 VACo Award Submission

## LOUDOUN COUNTY ANIMAL SERVICES

Loudoun County, Virginia



Animal Services

# Executive Summary

Loudoun County Animal Services (LCAS) is dedicated to keeping pets and their people together. Through the Loudoun Emergency Animal Safe Haven (LEASH) program, community members in crisis are provided with free and safe housing for their pets while they work with a partner agency to achieve stability.



**The LEASH program provides the support needed to move the entire family, people and pets, towards a more stable future, together.**

LCAS collaborates with other county health and public safety agencies and non-governmental organizations supporting Loudoun residents in crisis, including homelessness and domestic violence survivors. Together, we identify and support community members in need of a place for their pets to stay while working to address their immediate needs with a human service agency. In 2024, 623 nights of care were provided for pets in need, and 846 nights of care were provided in 2025 and the program was able to reach its current capacity. LEASH provides the support needed to move the entire family, people and pets, towards a more stable future together.

Once referred by a partner agency, pets entering the LEASH program arrive at the animal shelter either with their owners or through pickup by a Humane Law Enforcement Officer. Staff will regularly communicate with the owners of LEASH pets, providing updates and photos of the pet while they are in the care of LCAS, supporting the bond, and allowing the pet owner to focus on their own path forward, without worrying about losing their animal companion.

**On average, pets are able to be picked up by their owners after 9.5 days.**

*Pet names, photos and certain case details have been changed to protect client anonymity.*

# The Problem

Hospitalizations, housing instability, incarceration, entry into rehabilitation programs, residential fires, and domestic violence situations are just some of the events that can position residents to make difficult decisions about their pets, creating a compound trauma. As a result, community members often delay or avoid seeking critical help because they fear leaving their pets behind.

Without alternatives, giving a pet away may often feel like the only choice during an already-difficult time of someone's life. However, LEASH seeks to prevent this emotional disruption, both to support the pet and their person, but also to ensure a more effective use of animal shelter resources. Reducing the intake of animals who are loved and wanted by their owners reduces the expense and complexity of trying to house that pet for an unknown or indefinite period of time while finding them a new home where they must learn new people, new routines, and experience undue stress from losing the only family they have ever known. Animal shelters are vital in the public health and safety arena, and must already provide housing for stray, injured and abandoned pets, so intentional separation from pets who have established families should never be a consideration when it can be avoided.

**Studies have found that 15%-48% of women experiencing domestic violence delay leaving abusive environments, or return to them, out of concern for the safety of their pets.**



In 2024, LCAS saw 2,531 intakes, 30.65% of which were surrendered by owners and in 2025 saw 2,307 intakes, 36.06% of which were owner surrenders. Diverting a small portion of these animals from shelter surrender into retention can increase the shelter's capacity for care and promote better outcomes for both pets and their owners.

# Innovation, Collaboration and Modeling

The LEASH program's objectives are to provide short-term housing for pets of community members in crisis until reunification can be achieved and prevent the rehoming of beloved, family pets. Through foster homes, pets whose owners may need a longer period of care, can stay in the comfort of a home with a volunteer caregiver.

The LEASH program was developed as staff recognized the need to support pet owners in crisis. By relying on existing shelter intake and foster protocols and using already available supplies and staff, the LEASH program was able to be quickly implemented by LCAS in 2024.

The LEASH program serves all Loudoun County residents who are working with a partner agency and provides a minimum ten days of care, free of charge to the pet owner, and will routinely work with families to extend that period of time, always pursuing the goal of reunification.. The program is open to a variety of species and has seen cats, dogs and even horses, come through for care.

LCAS routinely collaborates with other county agencies including Mental Health, Substance Abuse & Developmental Services (MHSADS), Loudoun County Sheriff's Office (LCSO), the Department of Family Services (DFS), Veterans' Services, Loudoun County Fire & Rescue (LCFR) and other non-governmental organizations supporting Loudoun residents in crisis, including homelessness and domestic violence survivors.



**By leveraging existing programs, protocols, and staff, the LEASH program was quickly launched by LCAS with no initial start-up cost.**



# Costs and Staffing

LCAS runs the LEASH program at no additional cost to the County, utilizing current departmental resources and programming.

## **For same, or in most cases, lower cost, of housing a surrendered pet, a pet can enter the LEASH program.**

Costs associated with caring for these pets would be incurred regardless, as LCAS must provide care whether a pet is surrendered or arrives through LEASH. However, pets in the LEASH program generally cost less to maintain. They do not require long-term care, behavior evaluation or adoption counseling as most are reunited with their families.

Some LEASH pets stay in foster homes using donated supplies (bedding, toys) reducing overall use of cleaning supplies, staff time, and facility resources. Pet food is provided through the shelter's operational budget at no additional cost over routine animal intake.

Medical care consists primarily of core vaccinations, costing approximately \$35/pet, and is provided to all animals on intake. Microchipping and spay/neuter are fully sponsored for LEASH pets by a local non-profit and the Virginia License plate fund.



The community's engagement in supporting a neighbor in crisis has led to LEASH's success. LEASH fosters are recruited from the community and volunteers assist with daily care of in-shelter LEASH pets.

# Results

The LEASH Program provided 623 nights of care for pets in 2024, increasing by 35% in 2025 to 846 nights of care. In 2024, 81 pets were diverted from shelter intake through the LEASH program and in 2025, 85 pets. During these periods, pets were safely cared for while their owners navigated temporary crises, allowing the pets to remain connected to the families they know and love and avoiding surrender to the shelter or rehoming.

## Shelter Support for Senior Equines

In January 2025, a fire destroyed a local barn, temporarily displacing two senior horses. The owner cared deeply for his horses but had limited finances and no local network, leaving him with few options for support while repairs occurred. Contacted by Loudoun County Fire and Rescue, LCAS' Humane Law Enforcement Officers transported the horses to the LCAS barn, and brought them into the LEASH program, rather than requiring the owner to surrender, rehome, or send them to auction. LCAS staff utilized social media to mobilize donations from the local equine community. Staff also assisted the owner with identifying longer-term temporary care and within a few days, had secured space for the horses at a nearby barn.

Because of the LEASH program, the horses were able to return to their owner, avoiding the costs of caring for and difficulty in adopting out two senior horses, while preserving their bond with their owner. In addition, the community engagement allowed the horse owner to develop his own local network for further support.



## Max - Supporting a US Veteran



In December 2026, a community member was referred to the LEASH program as he was getting ready to enter a rehabilitation program. A US military veteran with no immediate family, he was reluctant to enter the inpatient program as he had no one to care for his dog, "Max" and did not want to give him up. LCAS was able to secure a foster for Max, which allowed his owner to enter the program fully focused on his recovery. After about 30 days of care, Max and his owner were reunited. While Max and his owner were a perfect match, Max's high energy would have made it difficult to keep him in the shelter or find him a new home. Thanks to the LEASH program, Max thrived in a foster home, his owner was able to reach stability, and this family moved forward together.