

WAYNE COUNTY

'What animal welfare should look like': Dearborn shelter expands in size, mission

Owen McCarthy, The Detroit News

July 19, 2025 | Updated July 20, 2025, 9:40 a.m. ET

Mark Pierson of Taylor had some money on his hands Saturday, which he earned from his parents after driving in a run at a recent little league game.

The cash had presented a question for the boy of what to do with it: But when Pierson's mom heard from a friend earlier this week about the grand opening of the MaryAnn Wright Animal Adoption and Education Center in Dearborn — and that there would be stray animals there from around Metro Detroit looking for new homes — an answer began to emerge.

It became clearer on Saturday when Pierson spotted Toad — a 14-week old mixed breed puppy with white-gray fur, big, dark eyes, and a calm disposition; and perhaps clearer still when employees informed the boy's mom that Toad was known by staff to be an especially good fit for kids with special needs, which Pierson has.

Though the family had already adopted one dog Saturday, it couldn't resist Toad. Sure, Pierson's "cat will be mad at (him)" now that he'll have to split his attention. But he's thrilled nonetheless, Pierson said, poking his hand through Toad's cage, inviting sniffs from the puppy, just minutes before the family would ink the adoption papers for good.

That staff had examined Toad's personality well-enough to identify such a match — and that the Piersons knew about the well-advertised, highly-coordinated, event — is a testament to the continuing growth of the adoption center, and the field of animal welfare in general.

Saturday's grand opening marked the completion of the adoption center following a \$12 million expansion and renovation, which brings it to just under 20,000 square feet. It also

kicked off its new marketing campaign, "All For Love," which emphasizes the facility's shift from a mere shelter, to a "community resource."

The ceremony was attended by city and state officials, staff, families, and, of course, four-legged guests who occasionally punctuated speakers' opening remarks with barks, yelps and yips.

The newly expanded facility allows the center to better care for animals, and ultimately, find more of them homes, officials said.

"It's what animal welfare should look like," said Cory Keller, the president and director of nonprofit Friends for Animals, which runs the facility.

The adoption center contains several rows of spacious "doggie dorms," outfitted with a modern shelter technology that may sound scary to us, but are actually intended to make life more comfortable for dogs: "guillotine doors" divide the dogs' living quarters into two portions with a sliding steel door, controlled by a lever. They can put dogs at ease by giving them a secondary area to occupy if they become stressed in the other. And, they provide staff a convenient way to clean the areas unperturbed, without having to remove the often-distressed animals from the doggy dorm altogether.

The most recently-minted area of the building sets aside well-concealed, air-controlled rooms for sick dogs and a separate one for cats, which play a key role in preventing illnesses from spreading throughout the shelter — a frequently encountered issue at the old facility in Greenfield, said board member Laurie Burh. There's also a food-prep and laundry room where staff prepare meals for animals and clean their blankets, and a "Tiny Whiskers Nursery" for newborn kittens.

Down the hall is a grooming room, where staff clean strays' matted fur upon arrival and assess their health. Next to it is one set aside for spay and neuter procedures. The hope is to raise additional funds so the center can equip the room proper equipment, allowing them to perform the surgeries on-site. That, in turn, will reduce the center's reliance on other veterinarians, cut adoption costs, and get animals ready for homes at a quicker rate.

A new events space allows Friends for Animals to expand its community programming, Keller said. Offerings include local classical musicians coming in to soothe stressed strays

with their playing, and an initiative where local kids read to dogs — an audience that tends to be less judgmental (and more sleepy) than the classroom.

And, with the expansion, the organization plans to offer more frequent no-cost vaccine clinics, obedience classes for families and their dogs, and expand options in the pet food pantry, which is aimed at assisting low-income families feed their animals.

It's all a far-cry from the center's old building on Greenfield Road, which Keller said looked like "your stereotypical Dog Pound," and where administrative staff worked out of trailers parked outside. It used to function more like one, too.

MaryAnn Wright, one of the organization's biggest benefactors and the president of its board, noted that when she got involved while working for Ford in the 90s, "animals would come in, and within a day or two, most of them were being euthanized."

For Mike Sareini, Dearborn City Council president, the expansion and the city's support of it is another example of Dearborn "leading the way" for Metro Detroit. The facility goes beyond fulfilling the municipality's statutory duty to provide an animal shelter, offering a resource for the entire region, he said, likening it to how the city's fire department services neighboring Melvindale.

"We did this because we believe that this is something that our residents cherish, our residents know that they need, and it makes Dearborn a more rounded city," he said.

To be sure, there's more Friends for Animals wants to add to its facility. Namely, it's still seeking donor support to equip the surgical suite with the equipment necessary to perform spay and neuter procedures. And, despite the recent investment, the center is currently operating at a deficit, Keller said, not helped by rising costs for energy and veterinary supplies.

But Keller, a self-described optimist, said he thinks his organization will be able to meet the moment, as securing donor support by making them a part of the "family" has always been one of its strengths.

A good sign for the fundraising effort? Board chair Wright, whom the facility is named for, announced a \$100,000 contribution during the ribbon-cutting ceremony, as that's the best way to "kick off a new campaign," she said.

An animal lover since youth whose had a successful career, she's happy to do it.

Wright told the audience, "What you have behind you is 20,000 square feet of love, compassion and second chances."