**Headline:** How a Worker Cooperative Is Mitigating the Stray Animal Crisis in Texas

**Teaser:** Houston’s Pet Care Co-op empowers humans and helps animals survive.

By Damon Orion

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**[Article Body:]**

The [popularity of support animals](https://www.thejoint.com/2023/10/09/explaining-the-popularity-of-comfort-animals) attests to the mental health benefits of bonding with a pet, such as [decreased stress, anxiety, and loneliness](https://www.psychiatry.org/News-room/News-Releases/Pets-Offer-Mental-Health-Support-to-Their-Owners). According to the [Mayo Clinic](https://mcpress.mayoclinic.org/healthy-aging/boost-your-health-the-benefits-of-having-a-pet/), having pets may also positively impact cardiovascular health and blood pressure control.

Unfortunately, many animals that could be treasured companions never get that opportunity. This is especially true in the state of Texas. [According to](https://bestfriends.org/no-kill-2025/animal-shelter-statistics/texas) the animal welfare group Best Friends Animal Society, approximately 568,325 cats and dogs entered Texas shelters in 2023, and an estimated 82,681 of these animals were killed. In 2024, TotalVet [reported](https://total.vet/animal-shelter-statistics/) that “Texas tops the list for the number of shelter animals killed in a given year at over 61,000. This number is nearly 10 times the national average and represents nearly 20 percent of the total kills for the entire nation.”

“Here in Texas, we have a terrible situation with strays and rescues,” says Melody Shannon, founder of the [Pet Care Co-op](https://petcareco-op.com/) in Houston. “[The area is] overrun with animals, so we need a lot of out-of-state help. A lot of these issues come from the fact that our fosters have been completely abandoned. The animal rescues don’t know what to do. They’re inundated with endless bills,” which results in a lack of resources for advocacy.

The Pet Care Co-op’s members tackle that problem by providing free care for foster pets. This often involves working with aggressive and emotionally unstable animals to make them fit for cohabitation. Besides helping get animals adopted and freeing up foster homes, this gives workers experience with animal care while they earn college credits for their efforts.

When Shannon and her husband launched a pet-sitting company in 2015, they discovered that pet care workers without proper training were being harmed, as were the animals they assisted. “We realized there was a real problem in our industry: [Workers] didn’t have access to education,” she recalls.

The couple addressed that issue by converting their pet-sitting business to a worker cooperative that offers its employees education and the opportunity to turn animal care into a career.

“What we do as a pet care provider is train people to be their own business owners,” Shannon explains. “We have tried and true policies they can operate on [that enable them to] immediately start training and working in the fields they want to be in. As they get education and training, we have them work in-field with foster animals, which allows us to assist the community in a different way.”

Shannon says the initial vision for this co-op was to create a business that would be accessible to all classes and income levels. She adds that one of the cooperative’s long-term goals is to provide jobs for unhoused individuals, victims of domestic abuse, and other people in need.

The Pet Care Co-op’s business model is designed to empower pet handlers. “Most trainers want someone to keep coming back to them,” Shannon says. “We want you *not* to have to come back to us.”

However, clients are always welcome to use the co-op as a resource. “If you have a new pet, a new obstacle, or a life change, we can help you with that,” Shannon says. “Life changes like bringing in a baby, college kids going off to school, or people being at home during the pandemic versus not being at home anymore [after returning to work at the office] can cause behavioral situations with your pet. We can help you with that without you having to take them back to the trainer.”

Rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach for behavior adjustment, the co-op takes an inventory of each pet’s temperament and character. “We want to see not only if the animal is extroverted or introverted but also whether it is capable of handling routine situations or is attracted to novelty-seeking situations,” Shannon says.

She adds, “First we take the animals with aggressive tendencies and give the knowledge to the people who can actually handle them. We do not touch the animals until the parents or the handlers can get the behavior under control, and then we introduce new handlers.”

As a worker cooperative, the Pet Care Co-op makes decisions by voting. Its members also have the option to give a percentage of their paychecks back to help pay for education and insurance. “That percentage is used like a loan, so we get insurance paid back,” Shannon says.

Explaining the advantages of this system, she adds, “Most independent pet care providers end up being completely overwhelmed. They’re working from morning to late night seven days a week, and they don’t have anyone to help cover them. We’re providing them a sense of relief as far as coverage for sick days and holidays without the loss of a paycheck.”

The Pet Care Co-op is part of a holding company called MadHouse Collabs, which Shannon describes as “a grassroots movement focused on helping our community rebuild, empower, and thrive with cooperative businesses.” She adds that the collaborative is launching a pet waste removal service and plans to create a pet recreational facility.

Shannon, who specializes in handling aggressive animals, says one of the biggest rewards of this work is “seeing rescue animals come 360 [degrees] and [helping reverse] desperate situations where people feel like they’re going to have to put the animals down.”

[A video](https://www.facebook.com/share/r/1A43sKmKx8/) of a dog named Willow demonstrates that dynamic. “We spent 10 hours with the parents and Willow for nine weeks,” Shannon notes. “Her parents’ commitment is the reason we were so successful.”