

# Changes at 53-year-old PAWS bring hope for wild and companion animals in need

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When **Heidi Wills** accepted the position as CEO of the Lynnwood-based Progressive Animal Welfare Society (known widely as PAWS), Covid-19 was not on her radar.

Weeks later she found herself leading an organization which, like other businesses, had to figure out how stay afloat in the tide of a pandemic.

The 53-year-old organization is still meeting its mission of rehabilitating injured and orphaned wildlife, sheltering and processing adoptions of cats and dogs, and educating the next generation of animal lovers.

The largest wildlife animal hospital in Washington, PAWS serves more than 5,000 wild beings a year, from hummingbirds to owls, black bears to beavers, all either orphaned or injured. The goal is to rehabilitate them and return them to their natural habitat, like the two baby harbor seals that are at PAWS right now.

“Also we have two baby bear siblings in our care, a brother and sister who came to us at two weeks old. Their eyes were still shut,” Wills said. “Their den had been disturbed and the mom did not return. Our staff is feeding them wearing bear costumes so they won’t associate food with humans. They will be wintering with PAWS and then released.”

The PAWS animal releases often go viral.

Most recently, in July the organization received a great horned owl through the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife, which had been called to help free two juvenile sibling owls entangled in a soccer net in Issaquah. The young male was able to fly away after being cut loose, but the female had serious damage to her wing and was transported to PAWS.

After 21 days of care, she was returned to the area where she was found.

“At the release, before the door to her cage was opened, we played a recording of juvenile owl calls to help reunite the family,” Wills said. “And it worked. The sibling vocalized from a nearby tree and the pair was reunited.”

In addition the 5,000-plus wild animals and birds served each year, PAWS also serves 5,000-plus companion animals — mostly dogs and cats. Strays and “owner-surrenders” come in from overflowing shelters across Washington and other states, such as Texas and California where the animals are in danger of euthanasia.

“Some animals from Hurricane Laura in Louisiana are supposed to come in this week,” Wills said.

And maybe because of the pandemic and the resulting loneliness people are feeling, the demand for adopting animals is great. Almost as fast as animals come in, Wills says they are adopted.

“We get multiple people interested in each animal and our community is stepping up to help,” she said, adding that almost every adoptable animal at PAWS is now spoken for, with more coming in all the time.

PAWS has switched to an appointment-only adoption model. But before making an appointment, prospective adopters are carefully interviewed by phone.

“This has worked out beautifully and by the time the prospective adopter comes to PAWS, they know a lot about the animals, and we know a lot about them,” she said. “These have been very successful adoptions.”

PAWS has made many more changes in a short period of time, including beefing up the board of directors from eight to 25 and managing the PPP loan that helped keep the 70-member staff working.

**Chuck Stempler**, who was the head of Seattle Humane’s board of directors for almost eight years, joined PAWS as its board president in May. Stempler, president and CEO of AlphaGraphics, takes a humble, open approach to leadership.

“Were one of many animal organizations and we all need each other,” he said.

Only a small fraction of what used to be 1,000 PAWS volunteers have been available during the pandemic to feed, walk and otherwise care for animals.

“Our biggest challenge is managing through the pandemic, which had drastically affected our ability to use volunteers on the campus. It’s really straining the full-time team, which is working 35% harder just to stand still,” Stempler said. “And, too, many folks are surrendering their companion animals in the pandemic, so the need for help is greater than ever and for an enlarged campus and updated facilities.”

PAWS has long outgrown its 7.5-acre campus and is in a \$30 million capital campaign to build a 25-acre campus in Snohomish, 8 miles east of its current location. They broke ground in February, readying the land for building in phases. Stempler expects the new campus will be ready enough to begin receiving animals in 2022.

“This is too large to accomplish in one fell swoop,” he said.

Leading the PAWS board in this time of Covid is undoubtedly challenging “but I have always been drawn to challenging positions,” said Stempler, who has been following and admiring the work of PAWS for years.

Wills, too, is up for the challenge.

“People come through because they know the important role animals play, intertwined with our lives,” she said. “We need them as much as they need us.”



COURTESY PAWS

Paws CEO Heidi Wills poses with her rescue cat June.

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