



A YEAR IN THE LIFE AT PAWS

2024 ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT

Read more about
Amy and JOLIE
on page 7.

A YEAR OF GROWTH

Dear Friends and Supporters,

I am filled with pride and gratitude for the incredible work we have accomplished together at Paws With A Cause (PAWS) over the past year. 2024 has been pivotal for our organization, marked by significant milestones that have strengthened our commitment to helping people and communities to live with dignity, companionship, confidence, and independence.

One of my personal highlights of 2024 has been serving as the Vice Chairperson of the Board of Directors for Assistance Dogs International (ADI). This prestigious role has allowed me to not only represent Paws With A Cause on an international platform, but also to collaborate with fellow leaders in the Assistance Dog community. Together, we are committed to elevating the standards of care, training, and support provided to Assistance Dogs and their partners. This collaboration reinforces our shared vision of expanding access to these life-changing services and ensuring that every individual who needs an Assistance Dog can receive one.

In line with our mission, in September, we started renovations of our PAWS campus, a project that has been long overdue. The updated facilities will provide a state-of-the-art environment for the training, care, and welfare of our PAWS Dogs and will help us to meet the growing number of Clients seeking assistance. We are excited to unveil our new and improved training and Client spaces, new veterinary and breeding clinic, and updated volunteer and foster puppy spaces in Fall 2025.

As we celebrate our growth, we also take a moment to honor a cherished member of our family. This year, VANDY, the first dog placed at Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital, retired after seven years as a valued team member of the hospital's recreational therapy department. She has made a profound difference in the healing journeys and will be missed greatly. But I am excited to share that our partnership with Mary Free Bed continues as PAWS is currently training VANDY's replacement, who is expected to join the hospital team by summer. You can read more about our partnership with Mary Free Bed on page five of this newsletter.

In closing, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to each of you—our donors, volunteers, and partners. Your unwavering support and dedication make our mission possible. Together, we are creating a brighter future for individuals and communities, one PAWS Dog at a time. Thank you for believing in our vision and for standing alongside us as we continue to make a difference.

With deep appreciation,



Michele Suchovsky
CEO, Paws With A Cause



ONE PAW AT A TIME

As I reflect upon my time serving on the board, I am filled with gratitude for the incredible community members who fuel Paws With A Cause and its mission to enhance independence and transform lives through custom-trained Assistance Dogs. Every story of empowerment, every milestone reached, and every bond formed between a Client and their PAWS Dog reaffirms the profound impact we are creating together.

This past year has been particularly momentous. We celebrated the public launch of our *Embrace the Journey* capital campaign, a bold step forward in expanding our ability to serve more Clients and families. This campaign is more than a building project—it's a reflection of the dedication and vision shared by our entire PAWS Family: Clients, volunteers, donors, and staff. We are thrilled to announce that we are on track to welcome you to our modernized facilities in 2025! Even more life-changing partnerships will begin in this space and that's thanks to your steadfast support.

Among the many highlights of the year, we proudly certified 34 new Assistance Dog teams and 14 Facility Dogs, each representing countless hours of training, care, and collaboration. These partnerships are the heart of what we do: Assistance Dogs empowering individuals to live with greater independence and confidence and Facility Dogs providing support and companionship, all thanks to the remarkable connections that PAWS Dogs can nurture.



The journey ahead is filled with promise, and I invite you to continue walking this path with us. Whether it's through financial contributions, volunteering your time, or spreading the word about our mission, your support is essential. Together, WE can ensure that Paws With A Cause continues to provide the life-changing dogs that so many depend on.

From all of us at PAWS, thank you for being a part of this incredible journey. Let's continue to transform lives—one Dog, one Client, one paw at a time.

Gratefully,

Sara Osterman

Sara Osterman
Board Chair

PUPPY LOVE



ALEXIS & TUNDRA



ALEXIS & BOSS

There is no denying the deep connection between a PAWS Client and their Assistance Dog. This bond is like no other, you might even call their journey to meet each other a “love story” of sorts. But before PAWS Dogs meet their true love - their Client - they experience another kind of love with their raisers, something you might call puppy love. The volunteer Foster Puppy Raisers who open their hearts and homes to future Assistance Dogs know how much love is involved in this journey. For Greg and Missy Bonner, love was a part of the experience in more ways than one.

The Bonners’ journey began with a simple wish: to find a way to involve their children, Alexis (age 7) and Mitch (age 5), in training their family’s dog to become a Therapy Dog. However, Missy struggled to find a program that was family friendly. Then she discovered PAWS, and through this program, the Bonner family welcomed their first PAWS Foster Puppy, TUNDRA. The Bonner family instantly fell in “puppy love” with the experience and have since raised 19 puppies for PAWS! But their love for puppies didn’t stop there - when two of their Foster Puppies were chosen for the PAWS Breeding Program, the Bonners eagerly agreed to take them in as well, whelping five litters of puppies in their home. Greg and Missy’s commitment to the PAWS program expanded with every puppy raised! Greg was on the PAWS Board of Directors for six years, serving as Board Chair for two, and Missy leads the PAWS Ada Puppy Club alongside two other raisers.

269 Raisers opened their homes to Foster Puppies in 2024.



What began with one puppy and a family's desire to volunteer together has blossomed into an inspiring legacy of love and dedication that spans over 19 years and 26 puppies.

The Bonners' love for the PAWS Foster Puppy program inspired more families to join, including the Gortsema family. The two families were introduced by their children, Alexis Bonner and Andrew Gortsema, who met in college. Andrew's family shared the same love for dogs and when the Bonners had a litter of puppies at their home, the Gortsema family visited and instantly fell in love with the pups. Shortly after their visit, the Gortsema family applied to become Foster Puppy Raisers themselves. "Our family always wanted to do something greater than ourselves," said Kristie Gortsema. "We have a family friend who has a Service Dog. We saw firsthand the impact that dog had on her life, and that inspired us to become Puppy Raisers too." The Gortsema family soon welcomed EVE, their first of five foster puppies raised for PAWS.

But the love doesn't end here – in June 2023, Alexis and Andrew got married! Following in their parents' footsteps, their love for dogs and for the PAWS Foster Puppy Program continued to grow. When Alexis' workplace chose to volunteer at PAWS, their team met a few puppies waiting for homes, including BOSS, who ended up coming home with Alexis and Andrew shortly after. Alexis explains, "We both love puppies and dog training, and we've both grown up having dogs in the home, so not having a dog in the home just didn't feel normal to us."

With Alexis' experience as a Puppy Raiser, it felt like second nature to them both, and they became a PAWS Foster Puppy Starter Home. With BOSS thriving in their care, Alexis and Andrew are now considering raising him all the way until he returns to PAWS at 14 months old, ready to take on his future as an Assistance Dog. One of Alexis' coworkers was so inspired by the experience that he went home and shared it with his family—and before long, they too decided to become Foster Puppy Raisers.

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PAWS is incredibly grateful to the Bonner and Gortsema families for their unwavering commitment to our mission. Their story is a true testament to the power of puppy love—and the lasting impact it has on everyone involved.

If you'd like to learn more about our Puppy Raising program and how you can be part of this heartwarming journey, visit our website: pawswithacause.org/raise-a-foster-puppy



Paws for HEALING

Although it's our mission to change lives for people with disabilities, not every working dog is meant to be an Assistance Dog. Some dogs find the best career as a Facility Dog, serving multiple people in an environment where a little extra love and support is needed.

This was true for VANDY, the first ever Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) PAWS Facility Dog. VANDY joined Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital's team in 2017, wagging her way into countless hearts while playing a crucial role in the rehabilitation and recovery for hundreds of patients until her retirement in 2024.

During her seven years at Mary Free Bed, each day looked a little different for VANDY. She spent her time with patients of all ages and abilities in a range of therapeutic settings—encouraging patients to walk a little farther, sit up independently, or practice speech through giving commands. By providing the opportunity for patients working on strength training to throw a ball or brush her, VANDY helped hundreds of patients reach their recovery goals in an innovative way.

“VANDY's role over the past seven years as the first AAI dog at Mary Free Bed has not only helped pave the way for a successful program, but has provided support in patients meeting their therapy goals,” said Maria Besta, CTRS, Manager of Recreational Therapy and Wheelchair and Adaptive Sports at Mary Free Bed. VANDY's career included 1,200 therapy visits, impacting not only the patients and staff she served at Mary Free Bed, but PAWS as well.



Courtesy of Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation.

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64 PAWS Facility Dog Teams are currently in the field.

VANDY was the first dog placed through PAWS Facility Dog program, paving the way for all Facility Dogs who followed, including FAITH – a lovable Golden Retriever and the second AAI PAWS Facility Dog to join Mary Free Bed. FAITH is following in VANDY’s “paw” steps, providing an engaging element to patient care and emotional support during the recovery process. “The bond between therapy animals and patients is truly special, and VANDY’s contributions will surely be remembered fondly,” continued Besta. “It’s always hard to say goodbye to such a beloved member of the team, but her legacy will continue to inspire the program and the many lives she has touched.”

To learn more about the PAWS Facility Dog program, visit: pawswithacause.org/what-we-do/facility-dogs/

Inspiration can be found anywhere! For Sue Cothorn, inspiration to support a larger cause was found at her workplace, Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital, when she met VANDY. Watching VANDY’s positive impact not only on patients and hospital staff inspired Sue to become a Campus Volunteer at PAWS, bringing warmth and compassion to the dogs onsite for two years.

One of Sue’s favorite parts of volunteering at PAWS is providing the dogs with extra love, attention, and support as they adjust to their new environments. By offering this care, she helps them thrive and build the confidence they need to succeed in their roles. Sue is deeply passionate about the well-being of the dogs and has learned so much about canine training and behavior during her time with PAWS, including the soothing art of Canine Massage Therapy, which the dogs absolutely adore!

For Sue, volunteering at PAWS isn’t just about giving—it’s also about receiving. Her time spent with the dogs is a powerful mood booster, and she feels a deep sense of fulfillment in knowing she is helping animals and humans alike. The PAWS team is equally grateful for Sue’s dedication and the heartwarming bond she shares with the dogs. Her contribution is immeasurable, and the dogs clearly feel her affection and care.



If you are inspired by Sue’s story and want to learn more about how you can get involved as a volunteer at PAWS, we’d love to welcome you to our community! Volunteering with PAWS is not only an opportunity to make a meaningful difference, but also a chance to learn, grow, and experience the incredible impact that PAWS Assistance Dogs can have on lives.

Visit our website to find out more about volunteer opportunities: pawswithacause.org/campus-volunteering

The Sound of **INDEPENDENCE**



In 2018, during a particularly busy work week, Amy missed several urgent calls from her daughter simply because she had removed her hearing aid. This moment of realization made her acutely aware of how much she was missing without a way to hear important sounds. It was clear that she needed a solution that would help her stay connected to her surroundings, even when she wasn't wearing her hearing aid.

Amy's search for a solution led her to the world of Assistance Dogs, after seeing a social media post about a man who used a hearing dog to help with his own hearing loss. Inspired by his story, she began to explore the possibility of getting an Assistance Dog for herself. Amy soon realized that finding an Assistance Dog was no easy feat. The demand for Assistance Dogs far outweighs the supply, and the process is both competitive and time-consuming.

After unsuccessfully applying to several other organizations, a friend of Amy's recommended Paws With A Cause. Amy submitted an application, and in March 2024, Amy received her new partner JOLIE, a yellow lab custom trained for her. In addition to sound response, JOLIE's temperament was a key factor in her pairing with Amy. Since Amy had other pets at home—such as birds and a cat—it was important that JOLIE was calm and could coexist peacefully with the other animals. With her gentle nature and focus on the task at hand, JOLIE was the perfect match for Amy.

**331 PAWS Assistance Dog Teams
are currently in the field.**



For Amy, JOLIE's training has already made a significant impact. JOLIE alerts Amy to sounds that she might otherwise miss—such as sirens when driving, doorbells ringing, phones ringing, and even kitchen timers. One of the most important tasks JOLIE performs is responding when Amy's name is called. Since Amy is deaf in one ear, it can be difficult for her to determine the direction of sounds, but JOLIE is trained to find the person calling her and lead her to them. Additionally, JOLIE alerts Amy to potential dangers, like breaking glass or approaching cars when crossing the street. This level of assistance has significantly improved Amy's confidence and safety in both every day and high-risk situations.

Over the months, Amy was pleasantly surprised by how quickly JOLIE adapted to new tasks. Initially, she had assumed that any new sounds would require contacting PAWS for additional training, but PAWS Staff showed her how to train JOLIE herself. With Amy's guidance, JOLIE quickly learned to recognize and alert to new sounds, like the beeping of Amy's phone or even specific notifications from her watch. This autonomy in training empowered Amy and further solidified the bond between them. Since JOLIE's arrival, Amy's life has been transformed in numerous ways. She no longer feels startled by cyclists approaching from behind when she's hiking, thanks to JOLIE's alerts. When crossing streets or walking near traffic, JOLIE stops her if a car is approaching, ensuring her safety. This heightened sense of awareness and confidence in everyday situations has made a profound difference in Amy's life, allowing her to engage more fully with the world around her.

For Amy, getting an Assistance Dog has been a life-changing experience—one that requires patience, perseverance, and preparation. But the rewards have been well worth it. With JOLIE by her side, Amy has gained newfound confidence, safety, and connection to the world. Assistance Dogs, like JOLIE, offer more than just assistance—they offer the opportunity for independence and a deeper connection to the world around them. For anyone considering an Assistance Dog, Amy's advice is simple: take the leap. It's a partnership that can transform your life in ways you never imagined.

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A GROWING COMMITMENT

Gerry and Nancy Hickey were introduced to Paws With A Cause by another PAWS supporter, Jim Hesseman. Jim and Nancy were colleagues at Steelcase Inc. where Nancy was on the executive team. When Jim served as a board member of PAWS, he invited the Hickey family to visit the PAWS headquarters in Wayland—located just south of Michigan’s second-largest city, Grand Rapids—to witness the operation firsthand. In addition to the warmth and peace that only come through puppy snuggles, the Hickeys came away from the experience “Knowing that PAWS, and their life-changing dogs, were a most worthy cause.” It inspired them to make their first gift, which aligned with their giving philosophy. “We have been fortunate in our own lives and feel it is important to support causes that can positively impact people who need assistance in some way.”

Since then, PAWS has become one of Gerry and Nancy’s top philanthropic priorities. They solidified their involvement because they continued to learn about the impact of PAWS’ mission, explaining, “To witness how a PAWS Dog changes the life of an individual is a powerful, heart-warming experience. Enabling a person to enjoy many of life’s daily tasks and enriching activities is a gift worthy of support.”

The Hickeys have watched PAWS evolve over the years, progressing from training a small number of hearing dogs to training four types of Assistance Dogs and developing new programs to support numerous communities. Today, in addition to creating PAWS Dog/ Client Teams, the Purposeful Placements program trains Facility Dogs to assist in hospitals, schools, and other



organizations, as well as placing dogs with a number of partners that serve sectors such as police and fire departments. Nancy and Gerry are eager to see the culmination of the renovation project made possible by the *Embrace the Journey* capital campaign. Early in the process, they saw that, “The need for a long overdue update of PAWS 30-year-old facility was a must.” Knowing how vital this project would be to PAWS, Nancy, who serves on the board of directors for retailer Meijer, Inc., also utilized matching funds to support the project, made possible by the Hickeys’ belief in PAWS’ future. “We are delighted to be two of the many who have contributed to a campaign that is making the vision of placing more PAWS Dogs a reality.”

The Hickeys have reinforced this belief in many ways. They have supported PAWS annual operations from the beginning and have continued to do so during the pledge they made to the *Embrace the Journey* capital campaign. They participated in our Name a Litter program, curating a list of potential puppy names from the cities that their family visited when their children were growing up. The littermates are now being cared for by their Foster Puppy Raisers, and the Hickeys look forward to hearing about the journeys of DUBLIN, FLORENCE, NEWTON, PARIS, and VENICE as they grow to impact the lives of their future companions and communities.

Reflecting on what they would want others to know about PAWS, they shared, “One of the most remarkable commitments PAWS makes is that, once someone becomes a Client, that individual remains a Client for life, as long as a PAWS Dog is needed. This continuity of care is exceptional.” The Hickeys are proud to be part of PAWS’ family of supporters and hope others will consider making a commitment as well.

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LENDING A PAW

PAWS Kennel Care Team Q&A



Q: What's your favorite thing about working at PAWS?

A: My favorite thing about working at PAWS is knowing my work has a real purpose and benefit to others. Rather than selling a good or service, we can provide a better life to someone at no cost to them, in a world where many of the things that we need in life come with back-breaking costs.

- Jake

Q: What's something people should know about your job at PAWS?

A: Something I would want people to know about my job as part of the care team is that we really would do anything for these dogs no matter the cost and we give everything we have to be able to make their time here the best it can be. Not a single day goes by that I don't think about the dogs whether I'm at work or not and I'm very happy to be part of a team where I can help make a difference in the world. Even if we are not personally the ones training them, we make sure they are eating well and not having any health concerns and most people don't know that if there's a weather storm or iced roads, we will be here for them to make sure they are well taken care of and okay.

- Ricky

Q: What's your most memorable moment working at PAWS?

A: I have so many memorable moments that I wouldn't be able to fit in just one sheet of paper. For me there has always been a special lab named KIRBY; he has been so unique and special in my heart. All of my dogs are special but he's been so magical and would always know when you needed him by your side. He was my best friend during some tough times and I love him so much.

- Ruby

Q: Is there a dog on campus right now that you really connect with?

A: All dogs are special but there's always ones we make connections with, we get to enrich them, take them out and see them grow. That's why it's emotional once they have to leave but at the same time, we're happy for them because we know they'll be leaving to make a difference and make someone else happy. I feel very lucky to be a part of their journey and to get a chance to make them happy during their time in the kennels.

- Gladys

2024 FINANCIAL REPORT

REVENUE	2023	2024
Contributions	\$ 1,944,924.00	1,768,889.00
Capital Campaign Contributions	3,849,622.00	1,871,184.00
Events	83,965.00	12,275.00
Direct Placements/Partnerships	296,105.00	29,699.00
Donor Restricted Funds	-	-
General Contributions	6,174,616.00	3,902,047.00
United Way Designations	356,272.00	286,263.00
Federal/State Combined Campaigns	46,132.00	47,449.00
Workplace Campaigns	402,404.00	333,712.00
Planned Giving	1,157,019.00	1,201,077.00
Foundation/Grants	559,627.00	797,654.00
In-Kind Contributions	190,848.00	71,437.00
Investment/Gain/(Loss) Sale of Stocks	467,796.00	1,095,256.00
Miscellaneous Revenue	71,178.00	128,075.00
Endowment Revenue	236,050.00	32,180.00
Miscellaneous Revenue	775,024.00	1,255,511.00
TOTAL REVENUE	9,259,538.00	7,561,438.00

EXPENSES	2023	2024
Program Expenses	\$ 3,426,329.00	4,319,095.00
Administration Costs	327,841.00	339,049.00
Fundraising Costs	693,631.00	770,906.00
TOTAL EXPENSES	4,447,801.00	5,429,050.00

CHANGE IN FUND BALANCE \$ 4,811,737.00

ENDING NET ASSETS \$ 13,324,720.00

If you would like to learn more about PAWS' annual finances, please visit www.pawswithacause.org/financials or call 616-877-7297 to request our detailed financial statement, 990 form, or audited financial statement.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE WITH EVERY UPDATE!

Join our mission to transform lives through the power of service dogs. By subscribing to our newsletter, you'll stay informed about our latest success stories, upcoming events, and how you can get involved. Each edition offers insights into our work, updates on our incredible teams, and opportunities to support our cause.

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