

**Written Testimony Submitted to the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing  
In Support of a \$5 Million Allocation for the Co-Sheltering Grant Program**

Champions: Senator Monica Martinez & Assemblymember Linda Rosenthal

**Submitted by:** Lisa Sperber, resident of Bronx, NY (81st Assembly District / Senate District 33)  
Person with lived experience of homelessness with her companion animal

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I am submitting this testimony in support of the \$5 million budget allocation to establish a co-sheltering grant program so that people experiencing homelessness do not have to choose between safety and their animals.

I want to share my story about my cat Marvin, because he was not just a pet — he was my family, my emotional support, and my reason to keep going. We were homeless together, and then at the very end, housed together. Unfortunately we never could find shelter together while we were homeless because no one would take pets.

I have so many wonderful memories of Marvin. One of my friends found Marvin in an abandoned building and brought him to me as a surprise. It was a little ball of fur that could fit in my hand. I knew we were going to have a special bond forever. He started to purr so loud. I got a warm feeling inside that he was going to be with me. My best friend, my confidant, not just a pet. During this time, the three of us were together and we were inseparable. But five years later, my friend Momma Jean got very, very sick and passed away. When she passed, Marvin and I were able to grieve together and I think that was important for both Marvin and myself. Thank God that Marvin and I had each other. Because we were friends and confidants, I could tell Marvin all of my memories and he would just sit and listen and then he would meow as if he was telling me all of his memories. So please do not anybody tell me that pets do not grieve or that they don't have feelings, because I know that Marvin, in more ways than one, had feelings and Marvin intuitively knew what I was feeling and I knew what he was feeling and you don't have that even with some human beings.

Let's fast forward. As Marvin and I were together, we were walking on the street in the city. I bumped into an old friend. We didn't have a good relationship, but I was vulnerable after losing Momma Jean. One conversation led to another and he invited me to his place. Unfortunately, I did not know that the worst would happen. His abuse started again. He was screaming and threatening me. Marvin would come over to me, but he didn't know if it was safe. I had to call the police. When they arrived, they said they had to take my cat to a shelter and asked if I would go to the hospital. I cried so much because that was the first time since I had Marvin that we were separated. I was hurt physically, but the emotional trauma was worse.

I later got a call from the shelter saying Marvin was not eating, drinking, or sleeping. He was sitting in the corner as if to say, "What is going on?" I felt the same way in the hospital. I joked with the nurse and doctor about bringing Marvin to help me heal. A few days later they said yes. When Marvin arrived, I couldn't stop crying and he was crying too, as if to say, "Oh my God,

mommy you were here.” He laid right next to me in the hospital bed. He was healing emotionally and I was healing physically.

A month later we were discharged and went back to sleeping in a box in the park or on church steps. I told Marvin I could not survive another winter like that. I found a shelter placement, but I had to ask a friend to take him because I could not bring him with me. After eight long months, I left the shelter and before I even got my keys, I went to get Marvin. We picked up the keys to our apartment, laid a cardboard box on the living room floor, and went to sleep there. We woke up looking at each other, realizing we finally had a home.

Years later, Marvin passed away in my home. He may not be with me in body, but he will always be with me in spirit.

No one should have to choose between shelter and their family. For people like me, our animals are our family. A co-sheltering program would have spared us months of separation, fear, and trauma. This funding will protect people and animals together and prevent suffering that is completely avoidable.

Please support the \$5 million allocation for the co-sheltering grant program so others do not have to go through what Marvin and I did.

Thank you for listening to my story.

— Lisa Sperber