

## Washington Animal Rescue League: Bringing People and Animals Together



**“Many of the people we serve have lost everything. But they don’t have to lose their animals.”**

-- Washington Animal Rescue League CEO Gary Weitzman, DVM, MPH

Gary Weitzman (left) decided to become a veterinarian when he was six. That is when he first read James Herriot’s *All Creatures Great and Small*—the classic book that led him to a Master’s Degree in public health, veterinary school and, ultimately, a private animal hospital in San Francisco. But the job left him empty and longing to work in the nonprofit world, serving clients who had nowhere else to turn.

He found the perfect match across the country. In 2004, he relocated to the Washington region to become Medical Director, and later CEO, of the [Washington Animal Rescue League](#). Weitzman arrived at a time when the organization was experiencing remarkable growth.

Founded in 1914, the League is DC’s oldest animal shelter, dedicated to rescue, rehabilitate, and rehome animals who have nowhere else to go. The League is known not only for its long history, but also for its innovative new shelter, which was designed to promote the physical, emotional, and social healing of animals recovering from past traumas, and for programs that benefit animals and the entire community, regardless of ability to pay. The renovated shelter is “a healing place for animals,” says Weitzman, pointing out that the standards for animal shelters are changing rapidly. Traditionally, he says, shelters were depressing places stray or abandoned animals were taken before being euthanized, “like prisoners on death row.”

In contrast, the renovated building is designed from the animals’ point of view. Steel-bar cages have been replaced with glass enclosed dog dens, cat condos, and puppy pads—a more humane and effective way to shelter homeless animals. Animals enjoy state-of-the-art veterinary care at the on-site medical center. Because it is attractive and filled with healthy, social animals in comfortable living rooms, the League is a more welcoming place for potential adopters.

Weitzman is perhaps most proud of the organization’s safety-net initiative, Project Rescue. “Part of our mission mandates that we ‘strengthen and preserve the human-animal bond by supporting animals in their homes,’” he says. Consequently, the League is responding to the economic crisis with an array of services that provide support for families and individuals who are finding it difficult to care for their pets in these challenging times. Project Rescue includes:

- Comprehensive veterinary services free or at a discounted cost to the pets of low-income people.
- Weekly low-cost vaccination clinics to accommodate the growing demand.
- Free and low-cost spaying and neutering.
- A year-round community pet food and supplies bank supported entirely through private donations.
- Safe Haven Program providing safe and comfortable shelter and medical care to animals belonging to people escaping domestic violence or living in temporary emergency housing. The League also takes in animals whose guardians have no choice but to re-home their pets.
- Free, professional assistance to people who have questions regarding pet care and training. Without this support, many would otherwise surrender their animals.

"Many of the people we serve have lost everything, says Weitzman. But they don't have to lose their animals. He goes on to share a letter from a recent client: "Thanks for being Apache's friends. Apache loved coming to the WARL, which says a lot about you. I'm glad it was the League team that took care of him in the end. He was able to receive the same type of love and care he'd known all his life!"