

PAWS, Shanti merge



Shanti Executive Director Kaushik Roy. Photo: Rick Gerharter

Two San Francisco nonprofits that work with people with AIDS and other illnesses are merging, the organizations announced this week.

Pets Are Wonderful Support, which helps low-income people who have disabling HIV/AIDS and other illnesses care for their pets, will merge with and become a program of the Shanti Project, which provides support to people living with AIDS, cancer, and other life-threatening illnesses. The organizations made the announcement in a news release Wednesday, August 12.

"Improving the lives of people who depend on our services is paramount to Shanti's mission," Kaushik Roy, Shanti's executive director, said in the release. "Combining our efforts with PAWS means we'll make a more meaningful impact for those supported by both organizations."

Frank Petkovich, Shanti's board chair, stated, "We're thrilled to bring PAWS into the Shanti family, which will provide continuity and a strong financial base from which both organizations will benefit." After the merger, Shanti's 2015-16 budget will be \$4.1 million.

"PAWS' work complements Shanti's efforts to provide emotional and practical support to vulnerable individuals across San Francisco," Petkovich added.

PAWS will continue to serve clients from its Mission district building at 3170 23rd Street.

Current, full-time staff members of both nonprofits will be offered jobs in the merged organization.

Katherine D'Amato, PAWS' director of client services, will serve as the PAWS program director at Shanti.

Among other changes, both groups' board members will be invited to join the new Shanti board, and the agency's volunteer operations will be combined.

As of December, PAWS had "630 active human clients and 812 companion animals," interim Executive Director Sarah Cramer told the *Bay Area Reporter* earlier this summer. Its budget is \$898,000.

Shanti serves more than 2,000 people annually in all its programs.

In an interview this week, Roy, who's 37 and a straight ally, said conversations about the merger had been happening "in earnest" over the last several months.

Asked which agency had the idea of joining together, he said, "It's a bit of both. We're in different situations, a little bit, in terms of where our long-term plans and goals are," but both have been "looking for ways to be more sustainable."

He added, "There's a lot of overlap in terms of the clients" that both nonprofits serve, and the combined group should be "more efficient and effective."

Asked in an email about how the merger would result in savings if positions were being offered to both organizations' full-time staffers, Roy responded, "There is cost savings because PAWS won't need to hire a new ED in a merged organization, which they would be doing, of course, if they weren't merging. (If they kept Sarah as permanent ED, then they would need to hire a development director)."

Cramer has been serving as PAWS' interim executive director, according to David Cumpston, a Shanti spokesman, citing PAWS' website. She's also been the marketing and development director, and Cumpston said she will work in development at Shanti. Cramer didn't respond to interview requests.

PAWS has a total of six staff members.

"No layoff plans are scheduled because of the merger," Roy said.

He also said, "because of a large client overlap, program staff have been meeting about ways to integrate direct services to be more efficient. For example, one staff member can support a client versus one staff member from each agency." He added that "a combined agency will be in a better position to focus on and increase development efforts and increase revenues."

Most of Shanti's staff will stay at the organization's location at 730 Polk Street in the Tenderloin, but "some will eventually move to the PAWS building because we're running out of space," he said. Shanti has more than 36 staffers.

In Wednesday's news release, PAWS board Chair Scott Jacobs said, "People who rely on Shanti for human support often receive daily compassion from their pets. All safety net service organizations need to give thought to long-term sustainability and how most effectively to provide services to the community. Shanti and PAWS have wonderful mission compatibility and we are thrilled with the merger."

Recent turmoil at PAWS

PAWS has experienced some turmoil in recent months.

Aaron Chandler, the group's former executive director who left in May, told the *B.A.R.* in July that he was unsure why the agency wanted him to go. But in a Facebook exchange, he said, "I was forced to leave."

Chandler said at the time that the nonprofit was "in the final stages of a merger conversation" but he wouldn't share the name of the agency. He also criticized PAWS' board.

"... [A]lmost no board members of community-based nonprofits like PAWS have any nonprofit work experience, and wouldn't be qualified to work in any position at the organization they are on the board of," he said.

At the time, Cramer wouldn't explain Chandler's departure.

Asked in a July interview why Chandler had left, she said, "We agreed with him that the message was he was leaving to pursue other opportunities. That's the commitment we made with him."

The *B.A.R.* had tried to ask Jacobs, the founder and principal of Benjamin Madison Wealth Advisors, about Chandler's comments regarding the board's lack of nonprofit experience, but Jacobs, who'd grown angry with questions about the ex-ED's departure, refused to let the reporter make any more inquiries.

"I know where you want to go with this," he said, before concluding, "I'm in the business of ending this conversation."

Roy said Chandler's departure and his criticism of the board doesn't raise concerns for him. PAWS' board has been "very committed" and "very professional," he said.

"They care very much about PAWS and the mission, and that's very evident, and that's why they've been having these conversations" about merging, he said. Chandler is "entitled to his opinion."

Shanti doesn't have any debt, Roy said. He didn't know exactly how much debt PAWS has, but said it's "not much." He said that PAWS has the mortgage for its building, and Shanti will take that on.

Roy said "we are in conversations" about what his salary will be after the merger. According to Shanti's most recent tax filing, his compensation is about \$119,000.

PAWS will be officially welcomed into the Shanti family October 14 during the organization's annual gala at San Francisco's Palace Hotel, 2 New Montgomery Street. Visit <http://www.shanti.org> for more information about the gala.