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LI nonprofits are pushed to the brink, and barely hanging on

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Patrons at a Long Island Cares food pantry in Huntington Station. Local nonprofits such as food banks, mental health clinics and domestic violence shelters are being pushed to the brink, the author writes. Credit: Newsday/Kendall Rodriguez

By Meredith Festa

Guest essay

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This guest essay reflects the views of Meredith Festa, president of the nonprofit animal rescue Paws United People, based in XXX.

I've been in the nonprofit sector for 25 years. For over a decade, I've run Paws Unite People, an animal rescue with a strong humanitarian component — because we realized it's not just animals who need saving. To break the cycle of abuse and neglect, we had to help people, too. That's where most of it begins.

I do not have enough digits to count how many times we responded to an animal abuse case, only to find our next move was to call Child Protective Services or Adult Protective Services, or help a human victim escape domestic violence. Without education, intervention and assistance, the cycle never ends. Our goal has always been to work toward breaking the cycle; that's how true change happens.

Across the country, local nonprofits — food banks, mental health clinics, domestic violence shelters — are being pushed to the brink. Animal rescues are overwhelmed. Everyone is being asked to do more with less, while waiting months — sometimes longer — for funding that was already promised. That's not sustainable.

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Within our own charitable work, we see families forced into impossible choices: rent or groceries, insulin or pet meds, feed the kids or buy pet food. We hear stories of grandparents skipping meals to feed their companions, or survivors of abuse staying in danger because they can't bring their pets with them. These aren't anomalies — they're warnings that every part of our social safety net is unraveling.

I believe in eliminating waste. I believe in accountability and smart budgets. But fiscal discipline isn't meaningful if it's built on the backs of people and animals already struggling to survive. Compassion isn't a luxury. It's stability. It's what keeps communities alive.

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This isn't about what nonprofits need to do better. We're already doing everything we can. The real question is: What are we — as a society — willing to do to stop this collapse?

I've never believed government should solve everything. Like most of us, I believe in stepping up, helping neighbors, and doing what needs to be done. That's what I've done for years — quietly, without headlines. But there comes a point when personal effort isn't enough to hold back a flood. That's where we are.

While we argue about who's to blame and fight over headlines and talking points, real people are slipping through the cracks. We are so busy trying to win arguments that we've forgotten how to take care of each other.

This isn't about politics — it's about decency. If we can't agree on that, what can we agree on?

I don't just work in this world — I live in it.

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When funding ran short, I relied on my personal savings, my family, and my friends. When a family couldn't afford vet care, or a survivor needed a safe place with their pet, I made it happen — out of my own pocket, out of sheer will. I'm not alone. Nonprofit leaders all over the country have done the same, quietly absorbing the strain because the need never stops.

But here's the truth no one wants to say out loud: We've become the people we help.

We're maxed out. Emotionally. Financially. Physically. We keep showing up, but we're breaking. And if the people holding the line can't hold it anymore — what happens next?

Who am I to even say this? I'm just a small charity on Long Island. We help animals and people — some days, barely holding it together ourselves. We're not on national TV. We're not backed by billionaires. We're not part of anyone's political platform. We're just ... here.

But to the people we help? We're the whole world.

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The senior who wouldn't eat so his cat could.

The veteran whose PTSD service dog kept him grounded.

The survivor who only left because we said, "Your dog can stay here while you get safe."

They don't care about headlines. They care that we're here. But I don't know how much longer we can be.

This is where I'm supposed to offer answers. But I don't have them. I just know we can't keep going like this.

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This is a moral crossroads. Compassion can't remain a talking point. It has to be a core value that rises above politics and reminds us what kind of country we want to be. Because if we wait any longer, we won't just lose programs or services. We'll lose the people who built them. And the communities that depended on them to survive.

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