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Animals economic casualties

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Staff photo/Emily Kesten - Maybelle, left, and Annabell bask in the sunshine last weekend at Hooves & Paws Rescue Inc. near Glenwood.

It's on the news every day - Americans are cutting back, either by choice or necessity. A look nationwide shows that some pet owners must decide between feeding the family or feeding Fido.

Animal shelters from Massachusetts to California have reported an increase of owner surrenders, with owners citing foreclosures or the inability to pay for pet food. Abandonment is also seen on the rise. Adoptions and donations are down, straining shelter budgets.

But that's not the case everywhere, according to local animal control officers.

Both Pottawattamie County Animal Control and the Council Bluffs Animal Shelter said there has not been a significant increase of owner surrenders because of the economic downturn.

"We have seen a couple of owner surrenders, where they say they can't afford to keep the animal," said Stacy Robertson, animal control officer for Pottawattamie. But the shelter, which takes in mostly dogs and some cats, has not seen a significant trend.

"This part of the country hasn't been as hard hit," said Galen Barrett, Council Bluffs' chief animal control officer. "We're fortunate."

Surrenders for the shelters tend to be bite-related or a lifestyle change, said Robertson. Other intake animals may be abandoned, neglected or abused.

But it sometimes depends where you look. No-kill animal rescues like Hooves & Paws Rescue Inc. near Glenwood have seen an increase of owner surrenders.

"It's really disheartening to come home every night to a full answering machine," said Genea Stoops, co-founder of Hooves & Paws.

Stoops said she understands the fear that comes with job loss and works with struggling owners to find a solution that does not involve abandoning, neglecting or euthanizing a pet.

The horse and large-breed dog rescue currently fosters 49 horses and 18 dogs, and 11 horses and nine dogs live on the premises. Many cases are coming from Kentucky, according to Stoops, especially from large-dog breeders, but the calls for help come from Iowa, too.

"The high prices of hay, grain and veterinary cost are causing many rescues to close their doors," said Stoops. "What happens to the animals in their care? Other rescues must step in and help place these animals or move the animals to their facility."

"We have been contacted by several other rescues to help place both horses and large-breed dogs or possibly take them to our facility."

Other horse rescues are seeing a rise in horses surrendered, neglected or cut loose. In Nevada, the number of abandoned horses found in 2008, 63, nearly tripled from 2007, according to the Houston Chronicle. Kansas and New Mexico horse rescues also reported record highs in 2008.

Some attribute the increase to the U.S. ban on horse slaughterhouses, but Mexico and Canada absorb those horses, with exports increasing from 11,000 to 57,000 during two years, said Keith Dane of the Humane Society. He told the Houston Chronicle that the bad economy is the "dominant factor."

The Unwanted Horse Coalition hopes to compile national statistics on abandoned horses sometime this year.

Hooves & Paws and other rescues work in a network to place unwanted or abused animals in safe homes. Even if there are people willing to foster an animal not available for adoption because of health or behavioral conditions, rescues and shelters have to find appropriate matches.

"I have a waiting list for people who want horses," said Stoops. "But they want broke horses." Many of the Hooves & Paws horses are too old, injured or abused to be placed in permanent or foster homes. The rescue provides food for eligible foster families, but those families must foot the vet bill.

Robertson said Pottawattamie County's adoption rate has been consistent in the range of 100 to 130 a year as well as owner claims. He pointed to education as the key for adopting or avoiding surrendering a pet.

"We try to work with people," said Robertson. "Often we'll be told, 'I can't keep this dog, he won't behave,' but after a couple of weeks with a volunteer trainer, he's fine."

Animal control officers also check that owners can give the animal the attention it needs, because "they're kids that never grow up," Robertson said. Adopters receive training materials and volunteers work with difficult dogs before they are adoptable.

Stoops said there are alternatives to surrender.

"We offer food, free shots and spay/neuter options," she said.

Barrett said struggling pet owners should talk with family, friends and neighbors to see if anyone has room for the pet.

For rescue shelters, which often get the worst-case scenarios, it can be a challenge to find the right owner for an animal that has suffered severe trauma. It often means finding new ways to expand within an operation's limited means.

Land for hay was donated to Hooves & Paws, but a barn needs to be built to store the hay, more stalls are needed for aging or injured horses and new fencing is needed to prevent a frisky, young Percheron from joining the dogs. The needed gravel for the driveway will have to wait, since there are hungry bellies to fill.

Stoops' dream is to have an indoor riding area so she can continue riding lessons - a small source of income for the rescue - through the winter.

"It's hard on the kids to not ride, but it's unsafe for the horses in that mud," she said.



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