

Small Animal Rescues Filling To Capacity

Home foreclosures and a tough economy are adding to the number of smalls pet relinquished.

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Some shelters have seen an increase in small pets coming in from owners who are becoming financially displaced from their homes.

There's no doubt, 2008 has been a tough economic year. Rising food costs, high gas prices and home foreclosures have put a dent in the lives of Americans who are keeping a tight watch on their pocketbooks. From what many small animal rescue organizations have seen, people who are becoming financially displaced from their homes are facing a crisis as to what to do with their small pets.

"In the last eight months we have seen an increasing number of people who are showing up at shelters, who are calling at the very last day when they are having to leave their home and they are just bringing their animals to the shelter," said Heather Bechtel, director of Rabbit Haven and Cavy House in Santa Cruz, California. "It's between their ability to get a roof over their heads and have animal companions."

The Rabbit Haven, which usually takes in 600 rabbits per year, has seen about a 25 percent increase in relinquished small pets due to home foreclosures, Bechtel estimates.

This figure seems to be the common consensus among other small animal rescues. The Heart of Ohio Ferret Association (HOFA) in Columbus, Ohio, and California Chins near San Francisco, California, have both seen dramatic increases in the number of animals brought in.

California Chins, which used to take in one or two abandoned chinchillas per year, now rescues about one a month, said director Lani Ritchey. She said most of the small animals are older and were probably "scooted out the door" because they were no longer wanted for a number of reasons. But the rescue has also taken in small pets from owners who cannot afford the extra cost.

"We started seeing a number of chinchillas coming in from people who were downsizing," Ritchey said. "They were going from a house to an apartment or they were moving out from one place to a cheaper place. Some of it was jobs. They had lost a job or had to take a major pay cut."

As a result of the increase in relinquishments, the shelters are filling up and must modify methods of operation.

HOFA takes in about 20 to 30 ferrets a month. Shelter chairman William Highley said that although HOFA is able to adopt out each animal within about a month, it is still filled to capacity.

"Right now we are in a rebuilding process. We keep trying to switch how the shelter is working. We are able to take in more ferrets than we used to be able to take in. The shelter used to never close," Highley said. "We've had to close the hospice."

With its critical attention to community communication, Rabbit Haven has kept its head above water, but has had to apply for more grants, especially for spaying and neutering and for foster home setup.

"We have had to increase the number of foster sites we have," Bechtel said. "We usually run at about 40 to 50. We now have 67 foster sites."

California Chins, also in need of more foster homes, has responded to the increase in chinchillas by focusing on poster campaigns to make the community aware of its adoptive services.

However, not all rescues in the country have been facing the challenge of finding homes for displaced pets. The Ferret Nook Shelter and Adoption Center in Cambridge, Wisconsin, has actually seen a decrease in the number of ferrets needing rescue and has seen none displaced by home foreclosures.



"We are in an area that isn't as bad as it is in most areas of the country," said executive director Kathy Fritz. "So it really hasn't affected us that much."

Fritz also said that adoption rates have remained steady, where other shelters are hurting.

A number of curious adopters have contacted California Chins, asking them to bring adoption events closer to where they live. With gas prices on the rise, people do not want to drive very far to adopt a new small pet.

Rabbit Haven, which usually sees a high adoption rate, has dropped adoption numbers from about five to 11 adoptions per show to about four to seven. The organization is adding more shows to help find the rabbits homes, Bechtel said.

In the meantime, the rescues continue to work to stay afloat. Each accepts donations and tries to raise funds for food and supplies by other means. Every year, HOFA hosts the Buckeye Bash, a statewide ferret show from which it garners most of its revenue. California Chins asks for a \$50 adoption donation to offset costs of the care kit sent home with every adopted chinchilla, while Rabbit Haven continues searching for grants.

"I'm really looking forward to some good news in the economy," Bechtel said.