

Oregon pet owners seek help due to economic woes

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Olivia Bucks, The Oregonian
 Katia Shavlovsky, middle and her daughter, Abby Shavlovsky, 9, of Beaverton, pick up food for their cat at the Cat Adoption Team cat food drive. CAT hosts the food drives to help families who can't afford food for their cats due to economic hardship.

The online pleading is enough to make an animal lover's heart ache:

* "First off," someone from Beaverton wrote recently in a Craigslist post, "I'm not the usual type to look for handouts. But with the way the economy is going lately, I have to humble myself and ask the community for help. . . . I'm not looking for a large amount of (cat) food, just enough to tide them over for the next couple of weeks. . . ."

* "If there are any organizations out there that have coupons or discounted spay clinics . . . for dogs," wrote another, "please let me know."

* "I have a cat named Daisy," a third explained, "and I can't afford to take care of her. I would really love to see her go to a loving new home. . . ."

And signs of the pinched economy are evident, too, in Oregon's animal shelters and veterinary clinics.

However, Northwest shelters don't appear to be overwhelmed with furry refugees from homes lost to foreclosure or families suffering job layoffs, unlike those in harder-hit regions. Multnomah County Animal Services, for instance, hasn't seen a notable increase in the number of abandoned animals, although adoptions are down slightly compared with last year.

Neither has the Oregon Humane Society's adoptable animal population boomed, although 25 percent more of those who drop unwanted animals at the shelter check off "moving" as the reason. Barbara Bagnon, marketing director, said that might indicate that Oregonians are downsizing, perhaps moving into rentals that don't allow pets.

At the same time, animal-rescue outfits field dozens of calls daily from people looking to hand their pets to new owners --a significant jump from previous Octobers.

"We get 200 to 300 calls a week from people who need to surrender their cats," said Shannon Phillips, an associate at the Northwest's largest cat shelter, the Cat Adoption Team in Sherwood. "The vast majority say, 'I'm being evicted and I can't take my cats.' "

While that shelter has seen only a slight decrease in people adopting cats and kittens, business at its monthly cat-food bank is brisk, said spokeswoman Kathy Covey. CAT has handed out more than 2,000 pounds of cat food to needy owners since June.

Sick or injured pets and the owners who want to help them may feel the poor economy's punch more acutely.

Veterinarians in Portland and elsewhere have noticed clients willing to pay if their pets require emergency treatment but delaying such procedures as teeth cleaning. Customers decline extra tests, spendy flea medicine or prescription kibble --the sorts of things they once paid for with a swift swipe of a credit card.

Animal Aid, a Southwest Portland rescue group, saw a 15 percent jump this summer in requests for its no-interest loans for veterinary care, said Joene Pike, executive director.

Clinics have had more than the typical number of pet owners asking to extend payments or, in some cases, begging veterinarians to treat animals for free.

"We work hard to try to make it work somehow," said Dr. Gregg Takashima of Lake Oswego's Parkway Veterinary Hospital.

A client arrived at his practice recently with a cat wounded four days earlier. Instead of bringing the animal in immediately, its owner treated the wound at home with hydrogen peroxide. The cat didn't improve.

When the veterinarian advised a surgical procedure to drain the ensuing infection, the clients balked. Money was tight, they told Takashima. Wasn't there another way?

The solution was less than the veterinary gold standard, but more affordable: Clean the wound and start the cat on antibiotics.

"There's a huge dichotomy," said Dr. Sheri Morris, "between those who do it all for their pets and those who can't afford the basics."

A veterinarian with clinics in Tigard and Keizer, Morris had a client recently decline needed blood work for a pet, telling her, "My house is in foreclosure. We can't do this right now."

Another, whose dog needed medication, put off buying the drugs for a week, until after payday.

"We're seeing a lot more of that than we used to," Morris said.

As some other Oregon clinics do, hers accepts CareCredit, a brand of low- or no-interest credit that can be used only for health care, including veterinary medicine.

Still, clients sometimes need more help. So, as some other clinics do, hers asks clients who can afford it to contribute to a "Happy Endings" fund, used to defray veterinary bills for the most needy clients.

Donations to such funds, and to animal nonprofits, appear on shaky ground as the housing slump continues and the stock market belches.

This month's annual Oregon Humane Society Telethon, for instance, raised about \$237,000 --about \$30,000 less than last year.

At the nonprofit DoveLewis Emergency Animal Hospital, executive director Ron Morgan said that a month ago he felt certain his organization would raise enough by year's end to benefit from a large matching-funds gift. "Now," he said, "I'm less confident."

Morgan and his co-workers are tightening their belts in some areas while expanding services elsewhere, hoping the strategy propels DoveLewis through this rough patch so it can emerge strong when the economy improves.

"Portland is such a great animal community," Morgan said. "We still see a lot of people who want to spend the money to pay for their pets, while they forgo other things. We see that happen every day."

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