

Animals Often Victims of Hard Times Too

With the increase in distressed sales, such as foreclosures, families are being forced to vacate their homes and rental properties resulting in an increasing number of abandoned pets. This is generally due to families moving to rental properties that do not allow pets or due to family finances that are too strained to continue to care for their pets. Recently, two local REALTORS® were showing a foreclosed home to their clients and they found dead cats inside. In another case, a dog died due to dehydration; food was left but not water. Another case involving abandoned horses resulted in penalties of \$85,000.

Kirsten Gross, director of Madera County Animal Services, said, “The foreclosure component is substantial but doesn’t account for the entire increase.” This year they’ve seen an increase of between 500 and 700 animals. She added that they generally receive about 9,000 pets a year. Less than 3,000 of the animals are adopted or rescued. Sadly, about 6,000 are euthanized. According to Sharon Fitzgerald with the Eastern Madera County SPCA (EMC SPCA), California’s Central Valley region has the third highest euthanizing rate in the United States.

Individuals can relinquish their pets to Animal Services in Madera. However, it is important for people to know that when faced with the need to find a home for their family pet, that before going to Animal Services, there are other resources. Gross suggests to first check with other animal agencies, friends, and relatives and make an attempt to find another home for their pet. She also recommended Craig’s List.

If you are being foreclosed on or must move to a residence that doesn’t allow for pets, please call the EMC SPCA or other animal agency with enough lead time so they can help. When they are aware of a pet that needs a home, they will try to adopt out or find an approved location for fostering.

“The problem is way beyond what anyone could imagine. Almost every home in our area has at least one pet,” said Fitzgerald. “When people lose their home, finding a rental that allows for pets often proves to be difficult.”

Vickie Deane also expressed the desperate need for animal-friendly rentals. “Please consider opening your home to individuals with pets if you have a rental property.” Besides the need for rental homes, due to strained finances, food for pets is also needed. Deane’s Thrift Shop supports “A Cause 4 Paws.” For people who need food for their animals, pet food is available from the Manna House via “A Cause 4 Paws” and from others that donate. For those that can donate pet food to the Manna House, small bags and cans are preferred. You can also bring in food to the Thrift Shop, which is located behind Oakhurst Cleaners off Highway 41, and she will ensure that the food makes it to the Manna House.

Abandonment is a misdemeanor; however, egregious cases could be treated as a felony. AB 2949, which went into effect January 1, amended California's Civil Code to require property owners, including banks or other corporate entities, to immediately notify animal control officials when animals are abandoned at foreclosed properties. California law states that any person or private entity shall immediately notify animal control officials for the purpose of retrieving live animals that have been abandoned, lost, or are in need of care due to cases of extraordinary emergencies.

California law also states that animal agencies must take charge of animals if able to do so. Agencies in our area include Madera County Animal Services (675-7891, www.madera-county.com/animalcontrol), EMC SPCA (683-1266, www.emcspca.org), Sierra Cares Animal Advocates (683-1214), and others. More resources are on the Madera County website. You can see some of the animals that Madera County Animal Services and others have for adoption at www.adoptapet.com. The EMC SPCA pets available for adoption can be found at www.emcspca.org/adopt.html.

The volume of animals is too great for Animal Services to take a report or pursue legal action on every case according to Gross. She said Animal Control is first and foremost concerned about the health and safety of the animals. If they receive a report, provided the animal is not in need of emergency care, they must post a notice for the owner to correct. They have to wait 24 hours before they can take an animal. However, at a recent conference I attended, I learned that another law exempts the posting of a notice of right to reclaim property for abandoned animals in circumstances such as foreclosure or termination of a rental agreement.

If you see an abandoned animal, please make the appropriate phone call. Be aware of excessive barking. This may be a sign of stress and abandonment. In addition, if you are able, please help those agencies that are helping to prevent animal abandonment.

The EMC SPCA is here to help in three core areas according to Fitzgerald. She said they want to prevent the birth of unwanted animals, provide shelter for those that fall through the cracks, and provide education. They could use your help as a volunteer or for donations for their shelter fund, spay and neuter program, or feral cat program. The EMC SPCA's feral cat program, called TNR (Trap Neuter Return), will provide traps, pay the neuter fee, and then return feral cats.

Another agency, HOPE (Halt Overpopulation with Prevention and Education) Animal Foundation, located in Fresno is strictly a low-cost spay and neuter clinic. They can be reached at 271-0209 or you can check out their services and fees via their website at www.hopeaf.com.

Please share with others that animal abandonment is a crime and that there are several local agencies willing to help find homes for pets. For various reasons through the years, I've needed assistance finding a home for a dog and cat. Local agencies helped me. Please give these agencies an opportunity to assist you if you find yourself in need of finding a home for a pet.