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Shaler

The PET BOOM!

A surge in demand for **pets** provides companionship and comfort during the pandemic



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THE PET BOOM!

A SURGE IN DEMAND FOR PETS HAS PROVIDED COMPANIONSHIP AND COMFORT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

BY JENNIFER BROZAK



Between lockdown restrictions and the loss of everyday norms, the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly taken a toll on people's emotional health and well-being. Through it all, there has been one silver lining: the comfort and companionship that pets bring to our daily lives.

Despite the chaos and challenges the pandemic has brought, pet adoptions from local shelters have remained steady. With people at home more, those who may have once found themselves too busy to care for an animal are now experiencing the joy of pet ownership—and the multitude of benefits that four-legged family members can offer.

Numerous studies show that owning a pet can offer many health benefits, both physical and mental. According to research, pets can help to decrease blood pressure, heart disease risk factors, anxiety and depression, and improve longevity—plus, during times like these when many people are spending more time alone and away from their loved ones, a pet's unwavering companionship can help people feel less lonely.

As the CEO of Animal Friends, a humane animal shelter in the North Hills, Kathleen Beaver has seen firsthand the joy that pet ownership can bring to those who feel isolated as a result of the pandemic.

"At Animal Friends, we know that our pets do so much for us—they make us better humans physically, socially and emotionally," she says. "They make us laugh, and they give us unconditional love, but most importantly, they are loyal and nonjudgmental companions who are always there for us. During the pandemic, we have seen so many touching stories of people

who have opened their homes—families, seniors, young professionals—all looking for extra companionship and to make a difference in whatever way they can during uncertain times."

Beaver, who has been with the shelter since 1997 in a variety of roles, noted that Animal Friends has seen a tremendous influx of foster applications during the pandemic.

"We were thrilled—though not incredibly surprised—when many of those foster animals, who were supposed to be temporary, ended up becoming permanent members of their foster families," she adds.

Aly Brown and Ashley Shoup, who serve as co-directors of the Humane Society of Westmoreland County, have witnessed similar adoptions at their shelter.

"Many of our adopters have shared encouraging stories of how their adopted pets have made such a difference in their lives. Most say they have bonded within just a day of adopting, and



Animal Friends CEO Kathleen Beaver



most adopted pets become accustomed to their new homes very quickly,” says Brown. “We are always ecstatic to hear stories of adopted pets who had spent a long time at the shelter, or pets with special needs, or mother dogs and cats of litters who have found their forever families.”

Both shelters have had to overcome the weighty challenges of operating in the midst of a pandemic. Animal shelters are considered essential and therefore are permitted to stay open; however, with mandatory restrictions in place, the shelters had to take a hard look at which programs would need to be temporarily suspended to keep staff and potential adopters safe.

For instance, between a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and government restrictions in place, Animal Friends found it necessary to close its public clinic and halt all in-person appointments, including its low-cost spay and neuter surgeries.

“We knew that there were still many owners out there struggling with health issues with their pets. So, with the expertise of our lead veterinarian, we began to offer free telemedicine appointments to help provide guidance and direction to worried pet owners,”

explains Beaver. “Not only were lives supported, but many were also literally saved due to her compassion and commitment.”

To comply with social distancing mandates, adoptions at both shelters had to move to appointment-only, but all the changes have had no effect on demand. More than 1,100 animals have been adopted through Animal Friends since March.

“People are home right now and see a great opportunity to welcome a new family member into their household,” says Beaver. “I commend our adoption team for the work they have done to continue to find great homes for our residents.”

The Humane Society also has seen a steady demand for pet adoptions, despite the pandemic.

“Adopters in quarantine have found that they have more time to give to a homeless pet, therefore keeping our adoptions successful, which also makes space at the shelter for more homeless pets,” says Shoup.

The pandemic has also required the shelters to rethink the methods they use to offer services to the public.

“As the pandemic grew and we watched lines of cars snake through parking lots for food donations, we were certain of one thing—if people were hungry, so were their pets,” notes Beaver.

In April, Animal Friends hosted its first drive-through pet food distribution and provided food for more than 700 hungry pets. It then partnered with other social service organizations to provide much-needed pet food to individuals in neighborhoods struggling the most. Since the pandemic began in March, Animal Friends has distributed nearly 200,000 pounds of free pet food to pet owners in need.



Volunteer Julie Galli with Animal Friends

“At Animal Friends, we know that a shelter should be the last resort for a pet in crisis. We are committed—especially now—to continue to provide the basic resources necessary to keep beloved pets in their homes, right where they belong,” says Beaver.

Both shelters require prospective adopters to complete an online or phone application before meeting with any pets. Once the application is approved, adopters will be contacted by an adoption counselor to set up an appointment to meet with a pet. The shelters take an individualized approach to matching pets with their forever families.

“Normally, an adoption can happen in just a few hours. However, during these COVID times, and the need for prescheduled adoption appointments, an adoption will likely take a couple of days,” explains Beaver. “Additionally, some of our animal residents prefer to meet an adopter a few times before going home, while others find love at first sight and are on their way out the door in no time.”

In addition, the Humane Society encourages potential adopters to research adoptable pets before applying.

“We strongly encourage any potential adopters to research breed and age requirements of adoptable pets, and consider the cost of veterinary care, training and the time required to housebreak and train adoptable pets, especially young pets,” says Brown. “Adoption counselors strive to match potential adopters with pets that will fit their individual lifestyles.”

To keep employees safe and maintain social distancing requirements, both shelters have placed volunteer opportunities on hold for the time being. They are hoping to welcome new volunteers sometime this year.

In light of the challenges presented by the pandemic, these organizations are grateful for the community’s support. With fundraising events canceled due to restrictions on gatherings, financial donations and pet supply donations are greatly appreciated. Anyone interested in adopting or donating to either organization can find information on their respective websites: thinkingoutsidethecage.org (Animal Friends) and hswcgbg.petfinder.com (Humane Society of Westmoreland County). ■