

Economy forcing many pets into shelters

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By Teresa Garcia

SAN MARTIN, CA (KGO) -- The escalating foreclosure crisis is having a devastating impact on families throughout the U.S. Not only are they losing their homes, many are forced to abandon their four-legged friends. Shelters and rescue groups, including many in the Bay Area, are now warning of massive overcrowding and are being forced to turn pets away.

"They were left in a box outside of a local veterinary office with a sign on it that said, 'We lost our home. Please help us find a new one.' This cat is 10 years old and the family has had him all these years. They had to give him up because of a job loss and the inability to care for him any longer. Also given up by his owner because they could not afford the vet bills," said Brigid Wasson with the Santa Clara County Animal Shelter.

And these are just the cats recently given up or abandoned by their owners -- all victims of the growing animal welfare crisis. The south county animal shelter has had a 13 percent increase in the number of animal surrenders in just the last year. The reason why? Owners say its economics due to the loss of a job or a home.

"This is the worst I've ever seen, and I've been in this field almost 20 years," said Brigid Wasson, a Santa Clara County Animal Shelter supervisor. Wasson says sometimes the San Martin Shelter takes in between 10 to 20 pets a day from desperate owners.

"It's just heartbreaking, people are coming in here, they've already lost their house, some of them are living in their car," said Wasson.

A recent survey by www.petfinder.com, an online adoption Web site, finds that 84 percent of its affiliated animal adoption organizations nationwide are reporting pet surrenders because of the economic downturn, home foreclosures and job losses. Seventy-four percent say they have seen an increase in pets being given away or abandoned since this time last year.

Many shelters and rescue groups are overcrowded and turning pets away. The harsh reality could be death.

"They were just sobbing and they kept saying 'please don't put our dog to sleep,'" said Wasson

Wasson says adoption is the most encouraging solution, another is to reach out to someone you know is struggling.

"Buying food perhaps, helping them re-home a pet, before it gets to the point where they have to drop them off at the animal shelter," said Wasson.

This dire dilemma of animals caught up in the financial distress is extending beyond cats and dogs.

At the San Martin Shelter, and even on pet adoption Web sites, people can find roosters, rabbits hoping for a home, and yes, domestic swine like Phillippe the pot bellied pig.