

Foreclosures slam doors on pets, too

By Sharon L. Peters, Special for USA TODAY

They're arriving by the thousands every month, homeless, hapless victims of foreclosure.

Family pets, their lives upended by the ravaged finances of their owners, are landing in animal shelters in large numbers in some parts of the country.

PET TALES: [The truth about cats and dogs \(or at least some interesting news!\)](#)

The precise numbers are unknown, because there is no nationwide standard for recording foreclosure pets and because many owners who surrender animals at shelters tell personnel only that they are "moving" and give no specifics.

But shelters that are experiencing an increase in pet intakes are almost without exception in areas where the foreclosure rate is high. Now there's growing concern that another, perhaps bigger wave of pet surrenders is in the offing, the result of the worsening economy and growing joblessness that will affect additional homeowners as well as renters.

"The fate of people's pets tracks with their own financial fate," says the ASPCA's Steve Zawistowski. He adds that although some shelters have been largely unaffected, "there are pockets" where so many homeowners are losing their homes that the number of pets relinquished to shelters, turned loose or abandoned is increasing dramatically. The pockets probably will spread with a deteriorating economy, he says.

The situation is sufficiently worrisome that the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) just created a \$15,000 seed-money fund (and is seeking public contributions to it) to help shelters and rescue groups accommodate in the short term their local surge in homeless pets. And many shelters in hard-hit areas are devising programs to respond. Among them:

- The Sacramento SPCA, which took in 100 more dogs and cats for "moving" reasons (176) in the past four months of 2007 as in the same period in 2006, has developed an early-assistance program to help people find ways to keep their pets or make temporary-care arrangements before they reach the out-of-options stage, says director Rick Johnson.

"We'll visit with the animals and we can meet with prospective landlords" when it appears, for example, that additional discussion might help a family keep the pet in new quarters. And, he says, the staff is willing to take whatever time it takes to discuss with owners the possibilities for keeping their animals.

- The Pennsylvania SPCA is waiving for foreclosure victims the fees associated with its "good-home guarantee" program, which promises the shelter will keep the pet as long as it takes to find a new home. "With everything else they're going through, (people who foreclose) should not have to worry that their animal will be euthanized," CEO Howard Nelson says. At least 10 families have taken advantage of the program in less than three months.

The Pennsylvania program is addressing one of animal welfare experts' greatest concerns: that pet owners, worried that their animals will be euthanized at the shelter, are setting them loose or leaving them in empty houses and garages with some food and water. Often the abandoned animals aren't found for days or weeks and are dead or dying, they say. And ultimately the survivors wind up in a shelter anyway.

As for the ones set free: Most house pets don't do well on their own and are often injured in fights with predators or other animals, hit by vehicles or infected with diseases, experts say.

Though acknowledging that many pets left at shelters are eventually euthanized if they aren't adopted, "if the animal is put in a shelter, at least she will have a chance and won't endure all that suffering," Zawistowski says.

The SPCA of Erie County, N.Y., is experiencing only a bump — about two a month — in foreclosure pets, says executive director Barbara Carr. But each is heartbreaking. She tells of a man who arrived at the shelter this month saying he had to give up his cat and two small dogs. When an employee walked outside to help him get the animals into the shelter, "she discovered that he had arrived in a U-Haul loaded with boxes and furniture. He had lost his home and had no place to go. The very last thing he did was surrender his animals."

All three now have new homes.

HSUS and ASPCA have sent out advisories imploring people to plan for their animals in case their finances nosedive. Also, "we're trying to get the word out for people to take note of what's happening in the economy, understand that animals are expensive, and if you don't have much cushion, now may not be a good time to get a pet," says Stephanie Shain of HSUS.

Zawistowski hopes the question of foreclosure pets will prompt a national discussion. Hurricane Katrina resulted in a recognition that after natural disasters pets must be managed, "and we have, as a nation, set up systems to do so," he says. It's important to see that when people are displaced by economic disaster, "we also need to manage the pets and should establish systems for that."