



# Rescue Me

## Saving Pets in the Carolinas

By PAM GLEASON & LAUREN ALLEN

**A**sk anyone working in animal rescue and they will tell you the same thing: there is a crisis everywhere you look. Adoptions are down, shelters are overflowing and there are needy animals in every state of the country. Why is it so bad this year, and what can you do to help? Animal rescuers say that everyone needs to be more involved if we want to build a community of compassion. It all starts with recognizing the problem.





Above: Puppies at the Home For Good Dog Wellness Center in Aiken, South Carolina. These dogs will be transported to New Jersey for adoption.

## Too Many Animals

“It’s the worst I’ve seen in 15 years of doing this,” said Toni Ann Turco, who is the founder of Home for Good Dog Rescue, based in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey with a satellite facility in Aiken, South Carolina.

This summer, both places have fielded a record number of calls from people wanting to give up their dogs. There are also queries from people who have found abandoned strays, desperate pleas from those who have uncovered hoarding situations, and cases of severe neglect and abuse.

“Every call is a different story,” said Turco. “You can’t generalize.”

“Shelters and rescues are overwhelmed,” agreed Andrea Walker who is the founder of Fostering Foster Rescue in Camden, South Carolina. She said that for years it seemed like rescues were making progress and it was perceived as cool to adopt, but now she worries that this may no longer be true.

## Why Now?

There is no simple answer for why rescues and shelters are experiencing such a difficult year. The most obvious problem is economic. People are struggling, and when this happens, animals are the first to be affected. Inflation plays a part: The cost of pet food is up almost 25% since 2019, and the cost of veterinary care is up over 60% in the last decade. Whenever and wherever people are out of money, animal shelters take in more pets, and rescues see more abuse and neglect.

Part of the problem may be cultural. Andrea Walker agrees that many people are having trouble making ends meet but she thinks an underlying culture of disposability is also to blame.

“We want what we want when we want it and when we don’t want it, we toss it away,” she said. “That’s the culture. That’s not just with possessions it’s even with living things ... Some people have to start being more responsible, and they have to realize that when you adopt an

animal, you’re in it for, I would plan on 15 years.”

Changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic play another part. When the lockdowns occurred in 2020, many veterinary clinics stopped performing elective surgeries such as spays and neuters in order to preserve critical medical supplies.

In April 2020, for instance, there were approximately 80% fewer spay and neuter surgeries than in a typical year, according to a study published in *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. Between 2020 and 2021, the study estimated that 2.7 million animals that would normally have been altered were not.

“The high level of spay-neuter achieved over the past five decades is the single most important driver of reduced pet overpopulation and euthanasia in animal shelters,” wrote the authors, concluding that “Veterinarians and animal welfare organizations should collaborate to prioritize recovery of spay-neuter capacity.”

Below: Rescue puppies in foster care in Aiken. Even a few months with reduced spay and neuter services can lead to a spike in unwanted litters.



## Fewer Vets; More Pets

With so many animals going unaltered, it is no surprise that there was a surge in unplanned litters all over the country, making spay and neuter access even more important.

Unfortunately, at a time when we need more veterinary capacity, we have less. A nationwide shortage of veterinarians has contributed to longer wait times for appointments, higher costs, a greater number of fertile animals, and many more pets going without routine exams and critical care. Animal welfare advocates are determined to reverse this trend.

“During COVID, a lot of the vets that were middle aged retired,” said Jennifer Miller, a founder of Friends of the Animal Shelter (FOTAS) Aiken which partners with the Aiken County Animal Shelter. “At the same time, we have more people owning pets, so it is a perfect storm.”

Aiken's FOTAS was a driving force behind a dramatic improvement in the conditions at the Aiken County Animal Shelter. When the organization was founded in 2009, the shelter was housed in a dilapidated building and more than 90% of the animals that entered were euthanized. By its 10th year, FOTAS had spearheaded a drive to build a new shelter, developed a network of rescue partners in other states, cultivated a team of over 300 dedicated volunteers and was regularly

finding homes for over 90% of the animals in the shelter. Their latest goal is to build a low cost spay and neuter clinic to serve the entire community – if all goes according to plan, this will happen within the next year.

Home For Good Dog Rescue is also striving to increase spay and neuter surgeries. This summer, CSRA [Central Savannah River Area] Veterinary Services opened on the grounds of the rescue's Aiken facility and is now fully staffed with four

## Adopt!

We've heard it over and over: adopt, don't shop. There may be times when a purebred dog is the only thing that will work for you, but most people can easily find their new best friend at a local shelter or rescue. You can even find purebred dogs in these places, as well as a growing number of "designer dogs," which are a trendy mix of two purebreds. If you have your heart set on a purebred but also want to adopt, contact a breed specific rescue organization: Almost every kind of dog has one. You might even find purebred puppies.

## Foster!

Fostering is the lifeblood of animal rescue. The more fosters there are, the more dogs that can be saved. Fostering can be a relatively long term commitment, or it can mean keeping a dog for a few days while it is getting ready to be transported to an out-of-state rescue or adopter. The accepted wisdom is that if you foster you are saving two lives: the dog you take home, and the dog that takes that animal's place in the shelter or rescue.

## Volunteer!

Volunteers are invaluable to every animal welfare organization. What can you contribute? Your professional skills and talents, your time, your creativity and energy – anything that needs to be done can be done, and is done, by volunteers. Check your local rescue or shelter and make yourself available – it does not have to be a huge time commitment. Just going to the shelter and walking one dog means that one dog got a walk she might otherwise have missed.

## How to Help



Roseann Miron walks dogs every day as a volunteer at Home for Good Dog Wellness Center in Aiken. She is shown here with adoptable Alpaca.

## Donate!

Are rescue groups always asking you for money? Saving lives costs money, sometimes a lot of it. Most rescues and shelters take in a little bit in adoption fees, but this is rarely enough to cover all their expenses. Donating to a local rescue group is the easiest way to help out – just be sure to know who you are giving money to. The big national groups with the heart-rending television commercials are generally worthy charities and there is no reason not to give to them. If you want to make a local impact, however, give to your local group. They are the ones on the ground in your area, working tirelessly to help dogs find their own forever homes. 



Above: Girl Conger fosters puppies for FOTAS Aiken.

veterinarians. The clinic is committed to keeping costs down, and has recently been awarded a \$25,000 grant to provide spay/neuter vouchers for additional savings to every resident of Aiken County.

Some parts of the Carolinas are suffering more from a lack of veterinary care than others. Aiken County is fortunate that it has this growing number of lower cost options, including a clinic at the SPCA Albrecht Center for Animal Welfare, and spay/neuter vouchers for low income families provided by the county. Without these options, veterinary care would be financially out of reach for many people – an average large dog might cost as much as \$800 to spay, for example. One factor driving the high price of veterinary care is that the cost of surgical supplies has skyrocketed – and again we have COVID to blame.

"They raised the prices during the pandemic, and they never put them back down again because they didn't have to," said Reid Barrett, who manages CSRA Veterinary Services.

## A Community of Compassion

People from all segments of society are involved in animal rescue, but horse people are often particularly drawn to it and many have the means and the time to make significant contributions.

"Most horse people innately care about animals," said Andrea Walker of Fostering Foster Rescue. "I think they naturally understand that you form a special bond with an animal like a horse, or a dog or cat, and they know there is suffering out there and they want to help prevent that. They understand that these are sentient beings and they need our care."

Fostering Foster operates out of what was once a horse farm, donated to the rescue by Sandy Dubose, a Camden horsewoman. The approximately 20-acre farm and barns aren't the only stalls in the Carolinas serving as rescue kennels: Danny and Ron's Rescue is just a few miles away. This rescue, founded and run by Danny Robertshaw and Ron Danta (both hall of fame professional hunter trainers) is located

Below: Danny Robertshaw and Ron Danta of Danny and Ron's Rescue



on their farm and it houses hundreds of animals during their transition from unwanted stray to beloved pet.

According to Ron Danta, the two horsemen began their rescue in 2005 after saving dogs left homeless by Hurricane Katrina. Danta and Robertshaw care for the dogs until they are ready for adoption and then take them to horse shows where they find equestrian homes. It has been such a success, they are now closing in on their 15,000th adoption.

"I think what makes us different as a rescue, is we do not have an adoption fee," said Danta. "But we are very tough on our adoption contracts and if you ever give the dog away you agree to pay us \$5,000 and you also will be sued...if you can't keep the dog ... if you get into financial problems, health problems, we send transportation at our expense. We will pick the dog up. We make a lifetime promise that these dogs will never end up in a shelter again."

Jennifer Miller, herself a horse person, believes that improving animal welfare starts with a genuine commitment made by the entire community. She is always adamant that the

changes that FOTAS instigated could not have happened without the cooperation of everyone from volunteers to government officials. The improvements came about as part of a communal pledge to do better for the animals.

"What I am most proud of," she said, "Is that in 2018 the Aiken County Council passed a unanimous resolution that the official goal of Aiken County is to save the lives of every adoptable cat and dog in the Aiken County Animal Shelter. That always gets underplayed, but it is so important."

Those involved in animal rescue can often feel like they are trying to sweep waves off a beach: no matter how many animals you save, there are thousands more that need your help. But there are many rewards to the work – seeing an animal that you have rescued go on to a better life; receiving a letter and picture from a happy adopter; knowing that you have made a difference. For those in rescue, that is what it is ultimately about.

"We're not on this earth to take," said Ron Danta. "We are on this earth to give and figure out a way to make the world better." 🐾

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