

Leaving Pets Behind

By Jennifer G. Williams

Pets these days have become a part of the family, but too often, pets of military owners are surrendered to local shelters due to a deployment, move or other circumstances.

While the Humane Society of the United States does not keep records on pets surrendered by military owners each year, some local shelters are starting to keep track of such information.

The Humane Society of the Pikes Peak Region (HSPPR) in Colorado Springs, Colo. — home to Fort Carson, Peterson Air Force Base, the Air Force Academy and Schriever Air Force Base — does not keep records on how many surrendered animals belong to military personnel who PCS, but officials say the numbers of relinquished pets each day is sobering.

"I can tell you, we receive an average of 60 pets every day in the summer months," says Stacey Candella, HSPPR Director of Community Resources. "And I can tell you that I see people in uniform every day in our intake area where we receive owner-relinquished pets."

Summer months are the busiest times in animal shelters, she says, because that is when so many people move, and that is the typical breeding season for cats.

But when healthy pets are surrendered to shelters, there is no guarantee of a happy ending. Candella says the Colorado Springs region is known as being a very dog-friendly area, but cats are less than half as likely to be adopted as their canine counterparts.

"Our annual save rate for dogs is about 81 percent, while the save rate



Decorative features at the Frigos de Paris. Picture of a cat lit by a chandelier. An artists' community and a creative place. © ATOUT FRANCE/OÉdric Heislly

for cats is about 37 percent," she says. "It's sad to say, but cats are so independent, that sometimes they are seen as disposable."

"There are just not enough homes for the number of cats coming in, so many of those cats were euthanized," says Candella. "This is why we would highly encourage members of the military to have plans for their pets if or when they do get deployed or move overseas — perhaps family members, friends or families on the base who can foster the pet while deployed."

"It would be wonderful to see military bases implementing their own foster care programs for their community of military families," she adds.

Fostering Military Pets

Steve Albin started netpets.org in 1996, as a one-stop archive of pet-related information. September 11, 2001 changed all that.

"I started getting phone calls from people who were familiar with my website, and they were telling me absolute horror stories about what had happened to service members' pets when they were deployed during the first Gulf War," he says. "Basically, they had to put up their pets for adoption, put them in a shelter or abandon them. I understand about 25,000 pets of military personnel at the time were put to sleep. I just couldn't accept that happening again."

So Albin started a foster program, MilitaryPetsFoster Project, that has

Pet Plan

Animal groups nationwide agree that the best option for relocating military personnel is to have a family member or friend agree to keep their pet while the service member is gone. But that option is not always feasible, especially when orders come on short notice, or you live far from friends and family.

Other options include shelters or private groups such as Military Pets Foster Project and Operation Noble Foster, which may be able to help place pets in foster homes. Military personnel may also be able to get assistance from their local base command.

If you do choose to leave your pet with a family member, friend or foster caregiver, the American Humane Association recommends you make a "Pet Plan" to ensure your pet is well cared for and reunited with its owner. Here are their suggestions:

Written agreement: Create a written pet care agreement. The agreement should cover important issues such as what will happen to the pet if the temporary caregiver can no longer care for him, who is liable for any damage done by the pet, what will happen if the owner is unable to reclaim the pet, and what happens if the pet is injured or dies while in the temporary home.

Pet personal profile: Complete a pet profile to help the caretaker understand the pet's particular needs. This profile should include the animal's health history, medications, temperament, eating and sleeping habits, training and any other important information. Forms can be found at www.americanhumane.org

Vet and vaccinations: Ensure the pet's vaccinations are updated and provide the caretaker with veterinary records. Leave the caregiver with contact information for the pet's regular veterinarian.

Identification: Tag the pet with all required rabies and license tags, and make sure that all tags include the temporary caretaker's contact information. Consider microchipping the animal as well.

Handling routine needs: Reach an agreement on how to handle expenses for food, toys, grooming, and routine and emergency care and make arrangements to provide the necessary funds to the caregiver.

Spay/Neuter: Make sure the pet is spayed or neutered.

For more information, visit www.americanhumane.org, www.netpets.com and www.operationnoblefoster.org.

placed more than 13,000 military-owned pets in the past nine years.

"We have tens of thousands of foster families who have volunteered through our site, www.netpets.org," says Albin. There are foster families in all 50 states and literally around the world." The project could always use more foster homes, especially in high-need areas with lots of military personnel, including near installations in California, Colorado, Virginia and Texas. More than 90 percent of foster homes are not military personnel, but are families who support the military, he says.

MilitaryPetsFoster Project has placed every type of animal you can think of — and some you may never have thought of, says Albin. "We've placed a

lot of dogs and cats, but we've also placed horses, fish, ferrets, even hermit crabs.

Military personnel fill out an application online, then Albin gets to work, matching up their pet with a suitable foster home. "Obviously, you wouldn't put a mastiff in a home with Yorkies or vice-versa," he says. Albin says he puts in roughly 100 hours a week matching foster pets with homes. "Thank God for coffee, cigarettes and Pepsi," he said.

The military pet owners are responsible for the normal monthly expenses related to their pets, including food and vet bills. The non-profit accepts donations to help with the other expenses that arise, including emergency care, if needed.

The military owner can visit the suggested foster care home, if desired, and has the final say on where their pet will be, says Albin.

All animals in foster care must be spayed or neutered and microchipped, he says. The exception is for show dogs or dogs in the show-breeding program. Those dogs are typically placed with breeders who are familiar with their special needs.

Albin says in the years he's been doing this, less than a handful of pets have had to be re-homed for whatever reason. "This has been an eight-and-a-half year learning experience," he says. "But if it ain't broke, don't fix it." ●