

Alone no more: People are turning to dogs, cats and chickens to cope with self-isolation

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Since local governments have asked people to stay inside to reduce the spread of coronavirus, animal shelters across the country have seen more pet adoptions than usual. Photo: Marek Szturc/Unsplash

During a normal adoption event at the PetSmart in Gaithersburg, Maryland, Lucky Dog Animal Rescue would find homes for about 15 dogs.

As coronavirus news started to spread the week of March 16, though, the waiting list skyrocketed to 40 would-be adopters. Coronavirus is a flu-like illness that began in China and has been spreading across the globe since December 2019. Health officials have been encouraging social distancing. This means staying home and staying away from other people to help slow the spread of the virus.

Mirah Horowitz, the rescue's executive director, said they had 30 adoptions in just three hours.

Forget toilet paper, milk and hand sanitizer. There is now a rush to stock up on cats, dogs, rabbits, fish and even chickens.

Many Forced To Self-Isolate

The coronavirus is spreading across the United States, forcing millions of people to work from home and schools to close. The promise of companionship, even in a time of isolation, is prompting some to take in animals. Many say they finally have the time to properly train and care for a new pet. Animal rescuers across the country say they are seeing spiking interest in adoption and fostering.

In California — where 40 million residents were ordered on March 19 to stay home except for essential jobs or trips, like getting groceries — Governor Gavin Newsom noted an important exception.

"You can still walk your dog," he said.

That was part of the appeal for Kathy Shield, a University of California, Berkeley graduate student, who adopted a 2-year-old brown and white dog and named him Atom.

The timing was ideal because Shield is working from home and can help Atom adjust to his new environment. She is also excited to have someone to talk to, even if he does not have much to say back. Plus, he will help keep her on schedule.

"Having a dog is going to force me to get up early in the morning because at an absolute minimum, I have to let it out to pee," Shield said.

"There's no question that animals provide incredible comfort and companionship, especially during times of crisis — and they certainly appreciate the attention — so we encourage people to continue to adopt or temporarily foster animals in need," said Matt Bershader, president and chief executive of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA).

Animal Shelters Forced To Close During Outbreak

Shelters need the help, as some animal rescues in big cities are closing their doors to help prevent the spread of coronavirus between people, but the animals still need to be cared for. Many organizations are hoping to find foster homes for their remaining charges and are still completing adoptions while closed off to the public.

Animal Care Centers of NYC (ACC), an animal rescue in New York City, put out a call for additional foster homes on March 13.

"We thought we'd get 50," said Katy Hansen, ACC's director of marketing and communications. "We got 2,000 people who filled out the application." The vast majority, Hansen says, are young adults who live with a roommate, have no kids and are either working from home or suddenly out of a job.

"Now they're home and they still have that super drive and super ambition," Hansen said. "Now, they're just pointing it toward helping animals."

The ASPCA says it has seen an increase in people interested in fostering and adopting animals in recent weeks and has managed to find temporary foster homes for most of its animals.

2DaRescue, a nonprofit in Mesa, Arizona, has experienced a 30-percent increase in adoptions and a 100-percent increase in fosters since the coronavirus crisis began.

In San Francisco, California, residents have been ordered to shelter in place since March 17. Local nonprofit Muttville Senior Dog Rescue has adopted out 10 dogs already this week and all the dogs found foster homes when it closed.

The Helen Woodward Animal Center in Rancho Santa Fe, California, found 51 dogs, cats, puppies and kittens a new home last weekend. This was up from a typical 33.

"We were all saying, 'Oh my gosh, what a weekend,'" says Jessica Gercke, the center's director of communications. Most of the applicants, she said, worked at schools in the area, which had been closed.

Adoptions Not Just About Companionship

Fostering also works well for those who can only help out during this uncertain period.

Maya Dangerfield knows her job as a video producer is usually too busy to accommodate a pet, so she and her husband decided to foster a dog while working from home in New York City instead. They picked up a poodle-mix named JWoww on March 19.

"It's nice to have a little doggy. Just someone to hang out with," said Dangerfield.

It isn't just dogs. People are bringing home all kinds of living creatures for companionship during an unprecedented time of social isolation. They're sharing photos on social media to provide a break from less positive news.

Pets can also entertain younger family members at home. Kenneth Lynch and Lauren Wakefield bought a blue and silver betta fish named Freddy for their two young children, hoping that feeding and cleaning the tank will instill a sense of responsibility.

This will help their son "occupy some of his time in a more healthy manner" while he's home from school, Lynch said.

Some people are getting animals for more practical reasons.

"We're kind of stuck at home, grocery stores are empty and now we have these chickens that are laying eggs for us," said Kelly Bordas, a new chicken owner in Oviedo, Florida.

Bordas and her husband purchased their first two chickens recently and named them Daisy Duck and Mabel. They have been a source of entertainment as much as food and Bordas' young daughter helps take care of the new arrivals.

"She loves them, she always goes out there and she wants to pet them. She wants them to be her best friends," said Bordas.

For Julianna Caplan, the coronavirus scare became the perfect time to finally give her 13-year-old daughters the dog they had been begging for. The whole family is home from work and school, so they went to the Homeward Trails Adoption Center in Fairfax Station, Virginia and left with a 2-year-old blue heeler.

They named the dog Pepper Corona for her gray and white patches of fur and for her entrance into their lives during this moment in history.

"It feels good to adopt, and the kids are happy. It feels like the right thing to do now on a psychological level," Caplan says. "I look at this dog and say to her, 'I don't know what your past has been, but your future is about to be awesome.'"

Quiz

1 Read the following paragraph from the section "Many Forced To Self-Isolate."

The coronavirus, a new, flu-like illness, is spreading across the United States, forcing millions of people to work from home and schools to close. The promise of companionship, even in a time of isolation, is prompting some to take in animals. Many say they finally have the time to properly train and care for a new pet. Animal rescuers across the country say they are seeing spiking interest in adoption and fostering.

Which of the following can be inferred from this paragraph?

- (A) Isolation is the primary reason that people decide to adopt pets.
- (B) The coronavirus has discouraged many people from adopting pets.
- (C) Adopting pets is irresponsible during a national crisis.
- (D) People are oftentimes reluctant to adopt a pet due to time constraints.

2 Read the following statement.

Shelters have faced new challenges with finding homes for animals due to the coronavirus.

Which sentence from the article BEST supports the statement above?

- (A) Many organizations are hoping to find foster homes for their remaining charges and are still completing adoptions while closed off to the public.
- (B) Animal Care Centers of NYC (ACC), an animal rescue in New York City, put out a call for additional foster homes on March 13.
- (C) The ASPCA says it has seen an increase in people interested in fostering and adopting animals in recent weeks and has managed to find temporary foster homes for most of its animals.
- (D) 2DaRescue, a nonprofit in Mesa, Arizona, has experienced a 30-percent increase in adoptions and a 100-percent increase in fosters since the coronavirus crisis began.

3 Which of the following statements BEST represents the Wakefields' approach toward caring for betta fish into their household?

- (A) They decided to evenly divide the responsibilities between each member of their household.
- (B) They wanted to help their children keep themselves occupied with a meaningful task.
- (C) They hoped that caring for the fish would help their children continue to learn educational concepts.
- (D) They assumed they would be entertained by watching their children care for the fish.

4 Why did the author conclude the article by providing a quote by Julianna Caplan?

- (A) to emphasize the hardship that people feel during the coronavirus outbreak
- (B) to highlight that kids are the primary beneficiaries of recent pet adoptions
- (C) to stress that pet adoption can be mutually beneficial for people and animals
- (D) to explain the steps people can take to keep pets safe during the coronavirus outbreak