



A crush of critters

Lack of spay and neuter surgeries causes spike in shelter populations

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JOURNAL NORTH

Barks and whines echo down the hallway as wagging tails and wet noses greet those who walk by.

Kennels in local animal shelters are brimming with dogs, cats and other critters as the facilities struggle with critical capacity issues. Several shelter workers said the influx in pets, mainly dogs and puppies, can be attributed to the lack of spay and neuter resources during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the pandemic first began in New Mexico, spay and neuter surgeries weren't considered essential and were suspended under public health orders, said Murad Kirdar, public and business relations officer at the Santa Fe Animal Shelter.

Now, there's an influx in dog populations at shelters because of that, he said.

A lot of the dogs coming into the shelter are around a year old, aren't spayed or neutered and don't have a microchip.



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Dezi Dillingham, an adoption counselor at the Santa Fe Animal Shelter, walks Stein, an 8-year-old dog, outside his kennel. The animal shelter hangs blankets in front of kennels to help keep the dogs calm.

TOP, L-R: Blue, a Chihuahua at the Santa Fe Humane Society and Animal Shelter, is walked back to his kennel after it was cleaned on Thursday. A large number of guinea pigs have been brought to the Santa Fe Animal Shelter since the start of the pandemic. Rudy, an orange classic tabby, naps in a cage at Felines & Friends, a second-chance cat rescue facility in Santa Fe. Rudy and four littermates arrived with their mom, Roza, from Roswell.

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This leads Kirdar to believe these dogs were born during COVID-19.

Another factor is that a lot of these dogs weren't properly socialized because people stayed home with their pets during the pandemic. If the dogs grow up without socialization, they likely won't be adoptable later on, he said.

As Kirdar walked through the hallways between kennels, he stopped in front of 3-year-old Chanel's enclosure. Chanel was brought to the shelter in late-2020 and is one of the facility's longest residents, he said.

She was surrendered to the shelter because her previous owner had to go to a senior living facility and couldn't take her with them. Kirdar pulled back the blanket in front of Chanel's kennel to give her some pets and she quickly jumped up to lick his hand, her tail wagging back and forth as she looked around with big, expressive brown eyes.

Kirdar explained that, in addition to the increased capacity, adoption rates have also slowed. For every animal adopted, four more come in, he said.

To help combat this, the animal shelter is reducing all adoption fees to \$50 for all animals 6 months and older. The shelter also offered no-fee adoptions over the Labor Day weekend, during which time the shelter was able to find homes for around 60 pets.

This issue isn't unique to the Santa Fe Animal Shelter. Other shelters, such as Española Humane, are also at critical capacity.

Mattie Allen, communications director for the humane society, said they have had to double up dogs in kennels to help make room for them all.

The humane society recently had 28 dog and puppies dropped off overnight and, as they were opening, three animal control trucks pulled up with more dogs, Allen said. That same day, another person surrendered two dogs, each with a litter of puppies.

Allen described the situation as a "sustained level of crisis." Without the help of fosters, that drop-off day would have completely overwhelmed the shelter. The humane society currently has almost 200 pets in foster homes, she said.

"We're definitely seeing the effects of the lack of access to spay-neuter services statewide. By just an increased population," she said. "We're also seeing a huge spike in vaccine-preventable disease. Some people were not able to get their vaccine updates, or even their regular puppy shots, because most vets don't have the capacity to take on new clients right now."



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Lucy, a 1-year-old Siberian Husky, peers out from a cage with other dogs at Española Humane.



Mattie Allen, communications director at Española Humane, gives treats to the dogs in cages.

Some vet offices also shut their doors due to the pandemic, she said, and, even before COVID-19, New Mexico faced a shortage of veterinary care.

Over the summer, Allen said she saw a lot of puppies with parvovirus and even distemper, which are illnesses puppies can be vaccinated against. Some of the puppies survived the distemper, but, once it turns into a neurological issue, it's fatal, Allen said.

In addition to dogs, some of the kittens at the humane

society also had ringworm and respiratory illnesses.

Though the main issue facing shelters involves an increase in dogs, cats and kittens were also part of the equation.

Rescue partner Felines & Friends is also at full capacity. The rescue helps take cats and kittens from the Santa Fe Animal Shelter and Española Humane when they might need a little extra help, or step in when the shelters are full. The rescue also takes cats from shelters in southern New Mexico, owner surrenders and more.



Bobbi Valentine Heller, executive director of Felines & Friends, holds Rudy, an orange classic tabby, at her cat rescue facility in Santa Fe.

Lounging on a cat tree without a care in the world is one of these cats, named Gypsy, said Executive Director Bobbi Valentine Heller. Gypsy came to the rescue from the Santa Fe Animal Shelter because she's diabetic and needed extra care.

"We don't have the size of facility that a regular shelter does," Heller said. "So, we don't have the ability to have open admission."

Heller said she attributes her full capacity at the shelter to the lack of spay and neuter services during COVID-19. She said that, by the time the surgeries were offered again,

the damage was done.

"We got set back a good two years because the young cats that came of age and didn't get fixed had a litter. They often had a second litter, sometimes three," she said. "We had the first litter giving birth to their own litter, so we had an outbreak of kittens."

Kittens can have their own litter well before they turn 6 months old, Heller said, which allows cats to reproduce quickly. Now, shelters and rescues are catching up with spay and neuter surgeries, but there's still a long way to go.