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PETS

Americans are starting to give up their pets because of COVID-19 hardships

Animal shelters and other nonprofits are working to help keep pets at home with the people who love them.



— Courtesy Best Friends Animal Society

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By Jen Reeder

When three older Labrador retrievers wound up at Lily's Legacy Senior Dog Sanctuary this summer, they hadn't done anything wrong.

Luka, 7, Kona, 9, and Bella, 11, had lived happy lives together as ranch dogs in California. But when their owner lost his business and his home due to the coronavirus pandemic shutdowns, he could no longer afford to care for them. He'd tried for about a month to figure out a way to keep them but realized he didn't have a choice.

“He was a mess,” Alice Mayn, founder of [Lily's Legacy](#), told TODAY. “Those dogs were his life. He'd done a really, really good job with them but he had to give them up.”

Because the dogs were so bonded to one another, the sanctuary managed to place them together in a new home. But Mayn is concerned that other senior pets are at risk during the pandemic. Lily's Legacy, which is located in Petaluma, California, has already had five dogs surrendered due to the pandemic recession, and she knows of two more coming in soon for the same reason.



— After being surrendered to Lily's Legacy Senior Dog Sanctuary in Petaluma, California, due to economic hardships, Luka, Kona and Bella were adopted together to a loving home. Alice Mayn, founder of the sanctuary, is concerned that more senior dogs will be surrendered during the pandemic and is hosting "Saving Senior Dogs Week" from Oct. 26-Nov. 1 to highlight the need for senior dog adoption.

Courtesy of Lily's Legacy Senior Dog Sanctuary

“We’ve had people that have been affected by the recession, and the lack of jobs, and not being able to pay their rent and that sort of thing,” she said. “They’ve lost their homes or have to move and can’t take a dog with them or are moving in with family and they don’t have room. There are a variety of things. I’m very worried about them – and this COVID thing obviously isn’t going to go away tomorrow.”

In August, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals released data estimating that 4.2 million pets will enter poverty in the next six months as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, a 21% increase from pre-pandemic estimates. The total number of animals living in poverty could rise to more than 24.4 million dogs, cats, horses and other animals.

Matt Bershadker, president and CEO of the ASPCA, said the organization is working to address the crisis. In March, the nonprofit launched a \$5 million COVID-19 Relief and Recovery Initiative to help families keep their pets at home by improving access to veterinary care, pet food and supplies.

“We are working to reimagine how the animal welfare and veterinary field can best serve pets, owners and communities,” he told TODAY in an email. “Providing access to free pet food, supplies, veterinary care, emergency boarding and information will help keep animals safe and healthy, in their homes and out of shelters, while also sustaining important family bonds for millions of people.”



— The ASPCA's \$5 million COVID-19 Relief and Recovery Initiative, launched in March, provided \$2 million in grant funding to more than 50 animal welfare organizations across 30 states. As part of the response effort, the nonprofit also donated more than 1,800 tons of emergency food for dogs, cats and horses with struggling owners. Courtesy of the ASPCA

Bershadker suggests people facing economic hardships contact their local animal shelter, veterinary clinic, food bank or other community service provider to learn more about available resources.

Sarah Brown, division chief of Manatee County Animal Services, which operates the Manatee County shelter in Palmetto, Florida, said her shelter and others are focusing on individual needs to assist with whatever issues people are facing. For instance, MCAS started offering a drive-up pet food pantry at the onset of the pandemic for anyone in the community who needed assistance. Many people came for food, but others still couldn't keep their pets.

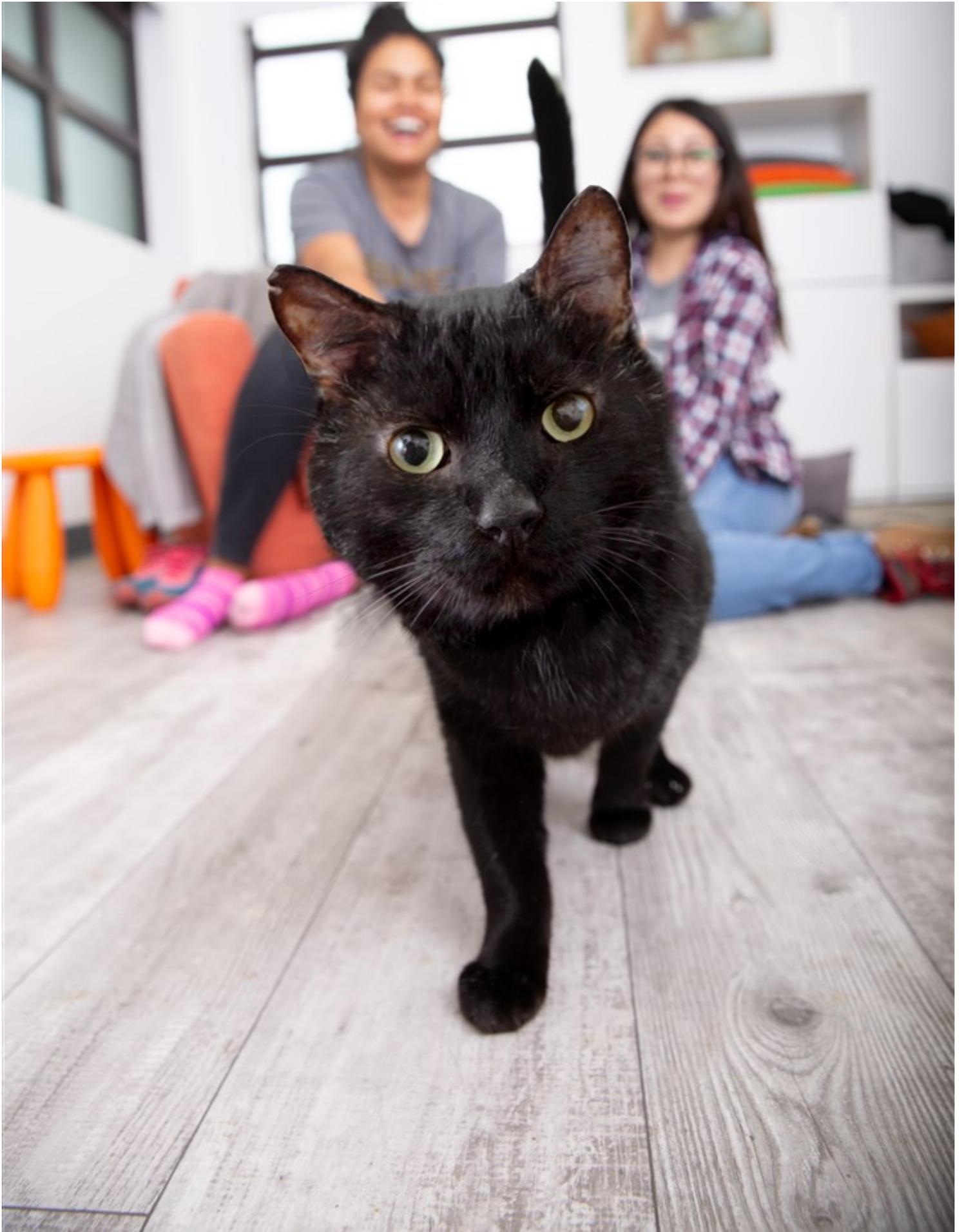
“While we continue to offer assistance to the community, ownership of a pet has become beyond the capacity for so many,” she told TODAY in an email. “Aside from simply not being able to afford their pets, we have seen many impoundments made because owners are in jail or have been sent for mental assistance.”



— Many shelters are working with veterinary professionals to provide free or discounted services like vaccinations, spay/neuter and other medical care to pets whose owners are facing financial difficulties due to the pandemic. Courtesy of the ASPCA

Kristen Hassen, director of animal services at Pima Animal Care Center, the municipal animal shelter in Tucson, Arizona, said the shelter has distributed a million meals to pets in the area since May, a huge increase. While the overall number of pets being surrendered is still down thanks to pet services and retention efforts, there's an increase in the reason: pandemic-related issues.





— Many leaders in animal services believe the future of animal sheltering will involve increased help from fosters, who temporarily shelter pets in their homes not only when the animal is waiting for a forever home, but while their owners are hospitalized or dealing with a temporary crisis.

Courtesy of Best Friends Animal Society

“We are seeing an uptick in intakes due to evictions, intakes due to temporary crises, and intakes due to job loss,” she told TODAY. “We’re seeing an increase in intakes due to people having either mental health crises or needing to go into drug rehab. Those are the kinds of factors that maybe don’t become immediately associated with COVID, but clearly, people are really struggling and everything we’re seeing in our data is pointing to that.”

In March, Hassen co-founded Human Animal Support Services, a network of more than 500 animal services leaders trying to transform the role of shelters.

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“We are extremely concerned nationally,” she said. “Every single week we do a national leadership call, and we’re seeing much of the same things.”

With grant funding, HASS has started providing not just pet food distribution but free veterinary care to pet owners impacted by the pandemic and boarding for pets whose owners are facing temporary crises or have been hospitalized with COVID-19.

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Sometimes those pets are boarded in the homes of fosters, which Hassen sees as a critical key to the future of animal sheltering. HASS is also pursuing software that can help people re-home animals themselves with support from local organizations.

“We’re trying to become pet support centers and resource centers, rather than these intake facilities that all we do is churn animals in and out of the system without addressing the root causes of why they’re coming in in the first place,” she said.

His violin is music to the ears of dogs that have been abused



Julie Castle, chief executive officer of Best Friends Animal Society, said housing issues are the second most common reason that people surrender dogs and cats to shelters. So the national

nonprofit advocates for affordable, pet-friendly housing without breed, size and weight restrictions on pets and cost-prohibitive pet deposits.

She said renters should learn their rights as tenants and know what resources are available in their community prior to eviction, and mentioned [evictionlab.org](https://www.evictionlab.org) as a good source for information. She also recommends embracing the power of “neighbors helping neighbors,” whether through the neighborhood social networking site [NextDoor](https://www.nextdoor.com) or reaching out in person.



— Animal shelters and nonprofits across America are working together to try to keep pets with the families that love them. Sarah Ause Kichas / Best Friends Animal Society

“Helping people find needed resources or even providing temporary foster care for the pets of neighbors in crisis can help keep their pets from being relinquished to shelters as they get back on their feet,” she told TODAY in an email. “The amazing outpouring of people fostering and adopting has made a huge difference in the impact to community shelters and ultimately, the animals.”

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That's certainly true for the three senior Labs – Kona, Luka and Bella – who found a new forever home after their owner could no longer keep them. Tara Nicole Weyr, the woman who adopted them, said they're enjoying their new lives as beach dogs in Venice, California.

“We're just having a marvelous time,” she told TODAY. “They are just delightful and fun, and they listen and they're very smart. They're just diamonds.”



— Tara Nicole Weyr adopted Kona, Luka and Bella from Lily's Legacy Senior Dog Sanctuary after their previous owner lost his home and business. *Courtesy of Lily's Legacy Senior Dog Sanctuary*

She said their “dad” did everything right in raising them, and that she thinks about him every day because she knows giving them up must have been so hard. She hopes that people who truly have no other option than to surrender their pets take comfort knowing there is still a chance for a happy ending.

“I know a lot of people who care about senior dogs and will adopt them,” she said. “There is hope out there.”