



# RESCUES: LEGITIMATE LIFESAVERS OR FOR-PROFIT PRETENDERS?

The question is controversial. The answer is complex. American Humane asks it anyway — and gets an earful from animal welfare professionals.

## The Scenario:

*A van from a Colorado puppy rescue group arrives at a New Mexico shelter that is euthanizing puppies because pet overpopulation in the area is out of control. At the shelter, the van is filled with puppies, some of which are clearly sick. It returns to Colorado, where the rescue adopts out the puppies. Adopters pay a \$75 fee and are taken in groups of 20 to pick out their new pets, after which they receive papers with a minimal amount of information. There is no screening, no matching, no post-adoption follow-up or support, and no spay/neuter prior to adoption.*

*This “Here’s your puppy; have a nice life” story is true, and variations on it throughout the country are forcing all of us to ask: How do you reconcile the good that rescues do by saving the lives of animals who would otherwise likely be euthanized, with the bad that some rescues do by operating in less-than-acceptable, even unethical, ways? That’s the issue animal welfare professionals everywhere are struggling with, including those at American Humane.*

Let’s make this clear right from the start: Many — probably even most — rescue groups in the U.S. are exactly what they purport to be: 501(c)(3) organizations working hard to save animals’ lives and doing their best to ensure that those animals receive proper care and find appropriate homes.

But with estimates on the number of rescue groups in the U.S. as high as 6,000, it’s hardly surprising that the practices of some rescues are raising eyebrows. And while the intent of this article is not to point fingers or name names, American Humane believes that the issue is worth examining, since it strikes at the very heart of our mission and the mission of all animal welfare organizations: to provide the best possible care, with integrity, to animals.

## “It’s Like Pornography: I Know It When I See It”

So what exactly makes a rescue group illegitimate? “It’s like pornography; I know it when I see it,” declares Mary Pat Boatfield, executive director of the Nashville Humane Association (NHA). And Boatfield has seen her share of such groups, having encountered a number of them through NHA’s community and mobile spay/neuter programs, which offer free spay/neuter services to in-county rescues. Boatfield can tick off a long list of problems she’s witnessed, including:

- Bounced checks from rescues to cover spay/neuter surgeries, vaccinations and flea/tick medications. Says Boatfield, “Our ROVER spay/neuter only charges \$10 for a rabies vaccination and a county or state rabies certificate, and I could paper one office wall

with their repeat bad checks over the years. If they can't pay \$10 for the vaccination and certificate with the rest of the veterinary care provided at no charge, how can they afford to care for all their pets?"

- Lack of spay/neuter post-operative care. "Instead of keeping the pet to ensure it has recovered and had stitches removed, they give it to an adoptive family with no instructions on post-operative care or possible complications. Then NHA receives a crisis call from the new adopter; we have no idea who they are, but they're in need of immediate veterinary care for complications such as dehiscing."
- Falsification of medical records. "They swap the records of a vaccinated dog with a dog that has not received a rabies vaccination so they can transport that dog out of state. Or they use the same vaccination records for more than one animal and give them to multiple adopters for dogs or cats that have not received that care."
- Rescues that cross county and state lines to "save" animals after a disaster. Boatfield has seen unauthorized rescues pose as official transport units and remove people's pets, never looking for or returning them to their owners.
- Individuals who volunteer with a rescue until their hoarding or unethical behavior eventually causes their removal from the rescue. "They then find another group and start all over again," says Boatfield. "We have seen this occur multiple times before we can refer that person to animal control for hoarding or advise the rescue to be alert."

Boatfield believes that for some rescues, the strong sense of their "noble mission" gives them a sense of entitlement. "Their attitude is, 'You owe me because of what I do to save animals.' Yet they don't know their limits in providing quality care for the animals they're responsible for, or their financial limits to provide even minimal food, veterinary care and grooming. Then when they get evicted or foreclosed on, they blame everyone else."

Boatfield is quick to point out that many rescues are first class and operate very professionally, even though they are primarily run by volunteers. She also acknowledges that the animal welfare industry as a whole has played a part in the problem, stating, "We haven't educated the public about what a quality rescue really is." As part of its ongoing efforts to advise the public on responsible rescues, NHA does the following:

- Provides an opportunity for responsible rescues to have a booth at its annual Dog Day event, where more than 7,000 people come for a day of pet-related activities and information.
- Gives community presentations that include guidelines on pet transport programs and expectations for participating rescues.

- Refers rescues to the Center for Nonprofit Management in Nashville, where they can obtain information on budgeting, board responsibilities, becoming a 501(c)(3) organization and other issues.
- Puts rescues on the contact list for NHA's educational programs in disaster credentialing, animal behavior, animal shelter research on pet relinquishment and other topics.
- Works with mid-Tennessee coalitions, such as the United Partnership for Animal Welfare, that include the general public, animal rescues, and animal welfare agencies and organizations.
- Maintains information on policies and procedures for animal welfare groups and makes it available to rescues.

## "If It Sounds Too Good to Be True, It Is Too Good to Be True"

Rescue groups are "an ever-shifting stream," says Martha Smith with a sigh. Smith is president of All-Breed Rescue Network in Colorado, an umbrella organization for private breed rescue groups that ensures its members meet strict standards before being listed on its website, [www.allbreedrescuenetwork.com](http://www.allbreedrescuenetwork.com).

Because of the sheer number of rescues that come and go, Smith believes it is imperative that shelters perform due diligence before forming a relationship with any other entity, especially if that relationship involves transfers. "Make the first trip to see the rescue yourself," she advises. "It's important to confirm the level of care the animals are going to receive. The more the receiving agency asks of you in terms of screening, the more likely it is to be a responsible organization. If you have doubts, don't do it!"

Continues Smith, "If it sounds too good to be true, it is too good to be true. If someone says, 'We'll come and take all your animals, no questions asked,' some animals will end up dying from stress, all will be placed very casually, and they will frequently be dumped by the adopters if it's discovered that the animal is not OK."

In regard to the equally thorny issue of transfers, Smith says transfers can be a useful, short-term tool in getting animals to a place where there is a market for them. "But it's not a solution," she emphasizes. "The mainstream shelter business ought to know that the solution to their problem does not lie in some mythical state where enough homes can be found for every dog who needs one. Every puppy shipped into Colorado may be displacing an adult dog who needs a home, or contributing to our overpopulation problem if it isn't spayed or neutered."

## "We Struggle Every Day With People Who Want to Rescue Animals"

Kate Anderson, DVM, knows all too well the nebulous nature of some rescue groups. As Pet Animal Care Facilities Act (PACFA) program administrator for the Colorado Department of Agriculture, she oversees the inspection of all licensed shelters, rescues and dog breeders in the state. PACFA is the facilities standards regulating agency for all such organizations, but only those that transfer more than 24 animals per year have to be licensed. The rest can go about their business unchecked.

"We struggle every day with people who want to rescue animals, but have no business doing so," says Anderson. "When money runs out at privately run animal shelters or sanctuaries, bad things happen. That's what we try to prevent."

Records of PACFA inspections are available through the Colorado Open Records Act and can be requested by the public. These records — which show the number of animals adopted out, euthanized, transferred into the state and more — are "a great tool to help determine the legitimacy of a rescue, but not a cure-all," says Anderson. "Records don't keep you from having problem rescues. It's all about doing your research." (Anderson notes that close to 20 other states have PACFA-like agencies, but says only one or two are as comprehensive as Colorado's cash-funded program, which is paid for by license fees.)

## "It All Comes Down to the Animal Care"

So how do you check on the legitimacy of a rescue? How do you put people in touch with the best places to adopt? How do you determine whether a potential partner agency is a good choice? According to Dena Fitzgerald, American Humane's program manager for publications and external communications, "It all comes down to the animal care being provided. That's how people need to determine the quality of the agency they're working with." Fitzgerald suggests asking the following questions:

- Is the rescue a 501(c)(3) nonprofit? If not, beware — but even if so, that doesn't mean they're necessarily following best practices.
- Does it charge \$250 for a puppy and provide little or nothing to the adopter, or does it provide services like exams, vaccinations, spay/neuter, behavior training and a retention program for the animals in its care?
- How does the rescue help animals become adoptable for a new home?
- What veterinary care do the animals receive before, during and after a transfer?
- Does the receiving agency provide resources back to the originating agency or community to help with its pet overpopulation problem (such as funds for a low-cost spay/neuter program)?

Concludes Fitzgerald, "Ultimately, nothing works better than physically seeing the rescue site and meeting the people. You need to make that trip if at all possible, for your sake and for the sake of the animals and the adopters."

## How One Shelter Qualifies Rescue Groups

"The current speed of information exchange and the transparency of this information age provide a great deal of information in a short period of time, and can make the qualification process much easier," says Mary Pat Boatfield, executive director of the Nashville Humane Association. To help ensure that rescue groups provide acceptable basic and veterinary medical care for their animals, NHA qualifies rescues on two different levels:

1. **Rescues that request no-fee spay/neuter assistance from NHA before placement of their animals.** To qualify for this service, rescues must be in-county and must complete an application. NHA's program supervisor and staff then ask for references from other rescues and determine the rescue's ability to provide a multi-day post-surgical recovery period. When animals arrive from any rescue, they are examined for cleanliness and observational health condition, and the veterinary staff refuses any animal believed to be an unsuitable candidate for spay/neuter. The staff advises the rescue of problems or concerns with the animals, and offers referrals to veterinarians who can provide consistent care at a low cost for the rescue's animals. If necessary, NHA requests that Metro Animal Care and Control follow up with the rescue. To be reinstated on the approved list for no-fee surgical assistance, the rescue must provide proof that it has raised the standard of care for its animals.
2. **Rescues that NHA refers the public to, or that NHA transfers to for specific breeds or mixed breeds.** These groups fill out a similar, but stricter, application. NHA refers only to 501(c)(3) organizations and checks references with the Nashville Kennel Club, state or regional representatives from national animal welfare groups, and like-mix or purebred rescues it has worked with before. NHA periodically updates the referral book and conducts a phone interview with the rescue's contact person.

To view NHA's rescue qualification applications, visit [www.americanhumane.org/rescues](http://www.americanhumane.org/rescues)