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Thanks to Sheltering in Place, Animal Shelters Are Empty

A recent pet-adoption boom is the feel-good pandemic story you need right now.



Lots of folks are fostering pets during the coronavirus pandemic—benefitting both the animals and their new owners. PHOTOGRAPH: BRIAN STUBBS/GETTY IMAGES

THE RIVERSIDE COUNTY Animal Shelter has a beautiful problem: It's all out of adoptable animals. "As you can see, we have a completely empty adoption center," animal services director Julie Bank says in a video posted Wednesday on the California shelter's [Instagram account](#). She and her coworkers, all wearing masks, throw their arms up and cheer, showing off empty pen after empty pen. A few days earlier, on Sunday, Chicago Animal Care and Control's Adoptable Pets program had similar news. "CACCC has no dogs currently available for adoption," the shelter [told](#) its Facebook

followers. “We’ve never typed those words before.” The last adoptable dogs—a “short, squat beefcake” named Penn and a “boisterous babe” named Alley—had found loving homes that day.

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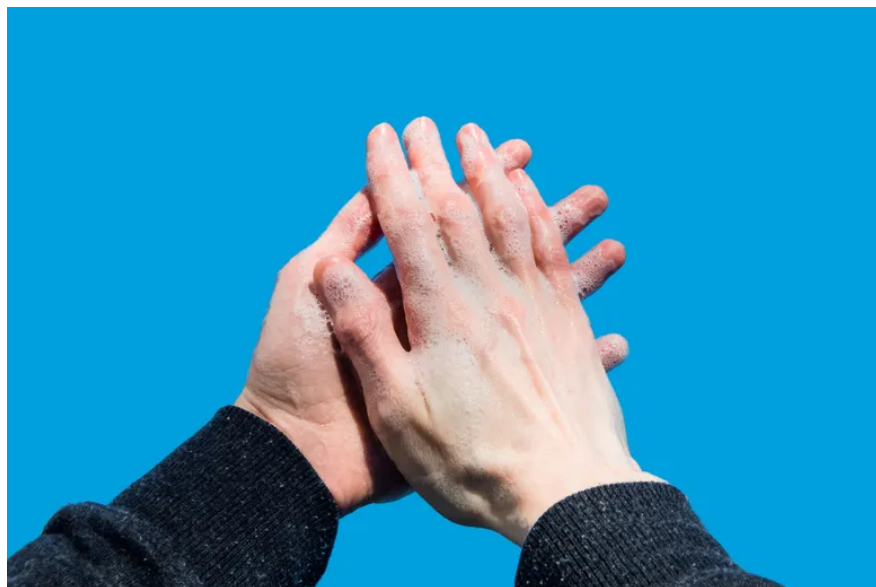
All over the country, from [New York](#) to [Wisconsin](#) and [North Carolina](#) to [Colorado](#) and [New Mexico](#), animal shelters are reporting massive upswings in the numbers of animals they’ve been able to adopt out or place in foster homes. The reason why is no mystery: As people are practicing social distancing to curb the spread of [Covid-19](#), many have come to the conclusion that now is the perfect time to bring a pet into their homes. Many shelters have put out calls for adopters and foster parents as the ongoing coronavirus outbreak strains their resources, but [others](#) have found that the surge has been entirely organic, an upwelling of kindness and care from the community. Either way, scores of pets finding new homes is one of the few good things to have come out of the pandemic. Heck, fostering or adopting a dog right now might even entitle you a [three-month supply](#) of free beer.

According to Kitty Block, president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States, the rates of fostering, in particular, have increased by 90 percent in some cities. “Folks who don’t have animals for one reasons or another, because of their work schedule or their travel schedule, that’s all changed right now,” Block says. Some New York City shelters are seeing application numbers at [10 times](#) the normal rate. One Pennsylvania shelter saw its foster application numbers [rise](#) from three-to-five per week to 40 per day. Many shelters, for their part, are [waiving](#) adoption fees, easing financial strain on new pet parents who may already be struggling economically due to the Covid-19 outbreak. “People who aren’t able to foster or adopt are going to their local shelters’ websites, seeing what they need, and are dropping off blankets and pet food,” says Block. “In the midst of all these things that are so challenging and so hard, communities are really stepping up for these animals.”

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The humans taking these animals into their homes see it the other way around. When you can’t leave your apartment to socialize, and touch has become taboo, many have found themselves yearning for animal companionship. “Being socially isolated, you’re at risk for depression and loneliness, and, in older adults, we know loneliness is associated with early death, Alzheimers,” says Sandy Branson, who researches the impact of pets on wellbeing at the University of Texas’ Cizik School of Nursing. “They think it’s as serious as smoking cigarettes.” According to Branson’s research, while pets cannot completely fill the void left by isolation from other humans, they do provide emotional support, fulfill the human need for touch, and offer significant relief to their caretaker’s stress and anxiety levels. “Giving to another being is a reason to wake up in the morning,” Branson says.

The benefit of having a companion animal is tangible. According to Iris Smolkovic, a psychologist who works with UK-based assistance dog charity Dogs for Good, interacting with an animal can lower your heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol levels while increasing production of feel-good hormones like dopamine and oxytocin. Considering how anxiety-inducing isolation is, a mood boost will not go amiss. Having a pet around the house may also help you stick to the strategies likely to help you through this isolation period, like daily exercise and structure. “We will have to establish a new routine for ourselves. Building it around our furry companion's needs might help as a starting point,” Smolkovic says. “Even if you live with other people, the companion animal can be a good distraction. They bring humor with their antics, which is important for stress relief. You can take turns in walking your dog, for example, to maintain a healthy distance in the relationship.” Anything for some much-needed space.



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BY MEGHAN HERBST

Of course, the pandemic has also brought its share of challenges to the pet-adoption world. One of the reasons fostering rates are so high is that adoption rates have been slower to skyrocket because of simple logistics. Big, open house-style, animal-human meet-and-greets that are ordinarily a shelter staple are simply not possible during a viral outbreak, so many shelters are hosting adoption visits only via appointment and are having people collect animals curbside, or making the whole process—from first meeting to home inspection—virtual. “It’s taking a little bit longer, doing all of these interviews virtually, and really following up on recommendations,” says Block. “If people are worried about the delay in getting an adoption, just know that we’re trying to make sure that we’re placing the animal in a great home.” As shelters, like every other workplace, find their staff attenuated by the outbreak, the delays may grow longer.

The other issue shelters find themselves facing is an increase in the number of people surrendering their animals, especially in major cities, either because the pandemic has left them without financial means or because they’ve become too ill to care for their animals. “It’s so, so heartbreaking,” Block says. In response, many shelters have urged pet owners who are currently well to make emergency plans with people in their network who could take care of their pets temporarily if they were to fall seriously ill. Fortunately, the fostering boom will go a long way toward balancing out the more negative trend. “We always need people to foster, but it’s so important right now,” Block says. “Getting dogs, cats,

and other companion animals into foster homes allows more room for other animals to come in.” Good thing so many people are already making the best of sheltering at home by making their home a shelter.

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STAFF WRITER

Featured Video



Every Dog Breed Explained (Part 1)

Gail Miller Bisher, best known as the voice of the Westminster Kennel Club, sits down with WIRED to talk about every single dog breed recognized by the American Kennel Club. Gail goes over the seven major groups of dogs (hound, toy, sporting, non-sporting, herding, working, and terrier) and what makes each and every dog breed so special and unique.

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