

Foreclosure?

Many Pets

Are Losing

Their Homes

By BRIDGET O'SHEA

People are not the only victims of the dismal economy. Pets are also being forced to cope. Several Chicago-area animal shelters report a sharp uptick in the number of abandoned dogs and cats in the last four years. "We certainly have seen an increase in dogs surrendered," said Dr. Robyn Barbiers, executive director of the Anti-Cruelty Society. In its last fiscal year, ended June 2010, the shelter received 854 dogs. This year, the number jumped to nearly 1,000.

Abby Smith, executive director of Felines Inc., a cat shelter on the North Side, said the number of cats she was getting had risen by around 25 percent since 2007.

That was the year the number of foreclosures and evictions began to accelerate, increasing a subset of displaced pet owners facing the wrenching decision of what to do with their pets when they were not allowed in temporary housing.

"People are scrambling, trying to learn where they're going to go next," she said.

Dr. Barbiers said she urged homeowners who were told to leave not to abandon animals.

Ms. Smith said more homeowners and renters were calling the shelter to ask about giving up their cats. She said that Felines, a no-kill shelter, would always accept a cat that had been adopted from Felines, but that it was often filled to capacity and could not accept every animal that came along.

"It's an unfortunate situation," she said. "The animals are the ones losing their families and their homes."

PAWS Chicago temporarily houses pets when owners are forced to leave their homes.

"You want people to be able to keep their pets," said Rochelle Michalek, ex-

The economy's littlest victims are turning up at animal shelters in increasing numbers.

ecutive director of PAWS Chicago, because pets can be reassuring in stressful situations.

When Kiomary Carreno was evicted from her home, she moved in with a relative who did not allow her two cats to join her. "I went two years without a job, and then unemployment ran out," she said. Ms. Carreno took her pets to the PAWS Crisis Care Program. "I was even allowed to have visitation with them," she said. Now employed at a meat-packing company, she is back in a home of her own, with her cats.

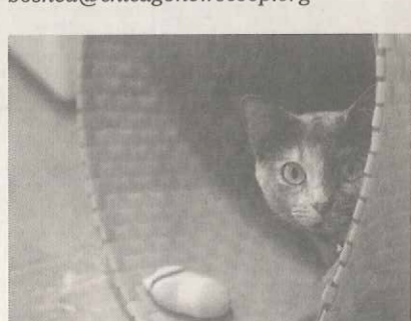
Karen Parker also lost her job and her home. After living in a shelter and then being hospitalized, she used the PAWS program for her three cats.

The shelter encouraged her to put the cats up for adoption, she said, but she balked. PAWS kept the cats for five months, well beyond the 30 days that is the standard length of time. "There were just so many extenuating circumstances," said Ms. Parker, who has found a pet-friendly place to live. "I simply cannot thank them enough."

The Anti-Cruelty Society also houses pets for 30 days. But Dr. Barbiers said it often bent the rules.

"It does give you a fallback when bad things happen to good people," she said.

boshea@chicagonewscoop.org



JOHN KONSTANTARAS/CHICAGO NEWS COOPERATIVE

Izzy the cat in her new, temporary home at PAWS Chicago.