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BREAKING TOP STORY

Mid-valley sees pet industry boom during pandemic

Maddie Pfeifer

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Alex Vigen, an animal care technician at Heartland Humane Society, cleans the lobby kitten cages Friday morning. Andy Cripe, Mid-Valley Media

Maddie Pfeifer

While many businesses and industries have suffered during the pandemic, the veterinary industry and other pet-related sectors have done more than just survive.

An uptick in the national pet adoption rate has proven helpful for businesses like veterinary practices, animal shelters, pet stores and more.

And that national trend is being seen in Linn and Benton counties too.



The national pet adoption rate was up in 2020 when compared to 2019. **Shelter Animals Count** reports that the national pet adoption rate for 2020 was 88% and just 79% for 2019. April 2020 in particular increased by 22% when compared to April 2019.

According to Heartland Humane Society Shelter Manager Debra Steeprow, there have been no lack of adoptions during the pandemic. Steeprow added that at one point during the pandemic, the shelter was scheduled out one month for adoption appointments.

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“I’ve been amazed and we’ve had a good year,” she said. “The community has really stepped up.”

At some times during the last year-and-a-half, the Heartland Humane Society has had no pets available for adoption. Steeprow added that she saw an influx of people from Bend, Portland, and other cities coming to the local area to adopt an animal.

Sara Girres, marketing and communications coordinator for SafeHaven Humane Society, saw similar patterns. According to Girres, the summer of 2020 in specific was a busy time for the shelter, and she saw a boom in adoptions. As of now, the adoption numbers are higher for 2021 than they were at this time in 2020.

However, the adoption rate can be misleading. While the adoption rate may have increased at the local shelters, the actual number of adoptions has decreased. Girres suggests that this could be because of temporary shelter shutdowns as well appointment-based adoptions which slow down the process. These trends mirror national data too.

According to Shelter Animal Counts, the actual national number of pets adopted in 2020 is less than 2019.

One reason the adoption rate is increasing but the number of pets being adopted is decreasing could involve a lower number of intakes at local shelters. Intake of pets includes animals that a shelter takes into their care. This could be strays, pets surrendered by owners, transfers, owner-intended euthanasia, and additional forms of intake.

For example, Girres said that SafeHaven had to temporarily stop accepting animals through their transport program. This program allows the shelter to accept animals from other states that have high euthanasia rates. This means SafeHaven was not

receiving as many animals as they usually might, thus limiting the amount of adoptable pets.

According to Steeprow, Heartland didn't see any major increases in owners surrendering their pets. This is another reason local shelters may not have had as many pets available for adoption as previous years.

Shelter Animal Counts reports that the total intake for 2020 was less than the total for 2019. While January and February of 2020 reported slightly higher total intake numbers than at the same times in 2019, that trend promptly switched in March 2020. For the rest of the year, each month of 2020 had a lower intake number than 2019.

While different organizations may calculate adoption rate using various equations, the rate is going to be heavily impacted by how many animals are available for adoption. With less animals being brought into shelters for various reasons paired with an increased interest in pets, local and national adoption rates have been higher throughout the pandemic.

But local shelters aren't the only ones noticing a boom in pet ownership. Kate Lindburg, owner of Corvallis pet store Animal Crackers, said she's noticed many new pet owners coming into the store seeking advice. She added that existing pet owners started coming in more often too.

"We became a social outlet for a lot of people," Lindburg said. "We were like the one safe place to go and talk about their beloved pets and get help. So I feel like we really became a strong social support system for a lot of our customers for quite a few months."

Through a partnership with Heartland Humane Society, new pet owners can use a coupon at Animal Crackers after adopting a pet from the shelter. Lindburg said she's still seeing people come in with those coupons every day.

While the business side of the pet industry is doing well, new pet owners themselves may be the ones struggling. Animal Crackers Sale Manager Miriam Orzol said she's talked to customers who are seeing behavioral problems with their pets.

Orzol said many people adopted pets while they were stuck at home and looking for a companion. While she said this is overall a good thing, animals and owners may run into problems as day to day routines change and owners go back to work.

Animal Crackers has even started curating their selection to include treats and toys related to potential behavioral issues new pet owners are dealing with.

For example, the shop is expanding their selection of calming treats. Orzol said new pets can experience separation anxiety as their owner starts to leave the house more often than they were at the beginning of the pandemic. This can lead to animals chewing on couches and tearing apart pillows and other objects in the house.

Orzol believes the United States has romanticized the idea of getting a dog, especially a puppy. Because of this, some owners don't always know what they are undertaking. This is a danger of getting an animal for the first time during a global crisis, according to Orzol. However, Lindburg added that the pandemic has benefited the adoption process because shelters are no longer jam packed and people are forced to wait for an appointment to get a pet.

Local shelters say the pandemic has been great for pets that might usually struggle to find a home.

"For a lot of animals, it was a blessing," Steeprow said. "These are pets that may not have had the opportunity to be adopted if it weren't for the high demand."

Before adopting a pet, Girres suggests taking your time to do research on breeds and to meet the animal in person to see if they'll be a good fit in your house. She added that going through a shelter with a strong foster program can be a good way to get the most information possible about a specific animal.

“Make sure it’s a long-term commitment you’re looking to take on,” Girres said.

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