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## Local

‘Foreclosure pets’ take a bite out of nation's animal shelters



(File photo)

People forced out of their homes by foreclosures are turning their pets into animal shelters, which are becoming overburdened.

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### BALTIMORE -

Along the first row of cages at the Maryland Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, a lab retriever named Riley and a floppy-tongued beagle named Aiden cast imploring looks at a visitor. Take me home, the looks say. Trust me, I'll be a pal.

The visitor moves down to another cage, where a pit bull named Crystal lolls next to a water dish. Then comes a spitz-Finnish mix named Zephyr who's matching lung power with a terrier mix named China. On this late winter afternoon, they're letting out howls like a full moon's on the rise.

A visitor feels like taking them all home. Thousands of dogs and cats come through this facility, located on Falls Road, just before you hit the Jones Falls Expressway. About 5,300 a year ago. About 7,000 the year before that.

And now, with the big news of the day, officials here are wondering if the numbers are going to jump significantly.

The big news is about real estate.

The nation goes through a housing crunch that throws a chill across the entire economy. Families tremble over their mortgage payments and attempt to stay one step ahead of the banks. In Maryland this week, Gov. Martin O'Malley, citing an "alarming" rate of thousands of mortgage foreclosures, announced emergency regulations to assist residents in danger of losing their homes. Foreclosures across Maryland are up 40 percent over a year ago.

And, in the face of such dangers, many anxious families look to cut any costs they can. Sometimes, across the whole country, they are turning loose their pets.

In Georgia, officials say they're seeing three times as many "owner-surrender calls" as two years ago. In parts of Ohio, where they're called "foreclosure pets," the number has doubled in the past year. In San Diego, some shelters are reporting a 30 percent increase over a year ago.

"Where you hear about large numbers of foreclosures, you hear about people giving up their pets," Maya Richmond, director of program development and operations for the Maryland SPCA, was saying this week. "We started hearing about it happening on the West Coast, and we hear it's moving East. We're not seeing great statistical changes here yet, but there's certainly anecdotal evidence. We've had people call to ask, 'How do I surrender my pet?'"

There is a delicate language employed here by everyone. SPCA officials do not wish to pry into any family's finances. They use a phrase: "reason for surrender." Pet owners tend to use another phrase: "The family is moving."

"We don't like to ask why they're moving," says Richmond. "We're trying to be sensitive."

Sometimes, families will say they're leaving houses for apartments where pets aren't allowed. Or, pets are allowed, but there are weight limits. These are tiny lies of embarrassment to cover large financial hurt, in which pets become a financial burden outweighing a family's enduring affection.

In 2007, says Richmond, 227 people "surrendered" their pets at the Falls Road facility. But this is only a small percentage of the animals that might be victims of the housing crunch. Across the country, economists and housing officials suggest upward of a million or more families are in danger of losing their homes.

In the Baltimore area, about 25 percent of last year's 5,300 dogs and cats that came through the Falls Road shelter were classified as "lost" animals, another 25 percent classified as "abandoned." The distinction? Some are found on the street, others "uncovered by landlords, or by good Samaritans" in empty or abandoned dwellings.

In some states, farmers have found dogs dumped on their grazing grounds. Around here, real estate agents have found dogs tied to backyard trees. Inspectors have found cats in garages. The ones clinging to life are taken to shelters.

The good news here? After an initial 10 days, in which the SPCA conducts medical exams and quarantines the animals, they find a new home in an average of five days — or, about a day and a half, on average, for puppies and kittens.

The bad news? Across the country, home sales have plunged to their lowest levels in years — and new home owners are often the most likely to purchase a new pet.

Also, as the housing crisis worsens, and foreclosures rise, so does the number of families looking to rid themselves of pets. And, while some “surrender” them to shelters, not all do. Some wander the streets or find themselves trapped in abandoned homes.

They're part of the fallout from the national mortgage crisis.

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