



As economy falters, shelters see more abandoned animals

By Tom Dalton

Staff writer

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SALEM — Five cats were stuffed into a pink plastic tote container a few nights ago and dumped in the middle of a busy Market Basket parking lot on Highland Avenue.

Two weeks ago, in the middle of the night, four cats were left at the door of the Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem, also inside a plastic tote bin with no air holes. By the time shelter officials arrived in the morning, one of the cats had escaped.

There was a note pinned to the box: "Hello, my name is Shaggy. ... I and my friends don't have a home anymore. ..."

Area shelter officials and animal activists say incidents like these appear to be signs of pets paying the price for a faltering economy.

"I think it's just desperation," said Betsy Tufts, the Marblehead animal control officer who responded to Market Basket on a mutual aid call. "But (the pet owners) are doing the most stupid and heartless thing they can do."

"People are starting to abandon more animals due to the economy," said Brian Adams, a spokesman for Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals-Angell. "Unfortunately, these pet owners are not taking the proper precautions for their animals' health, which includes surrendering them to the proper animal welfare agencies."

Fortunately, dumping pets in boxes or outdoors is the exception, officials say.

However, shelters are encountering more owners who are giving up cats or dogs because they can no longer afford them.

The Boston office of the MSPCA-Angell keeps records of when pet owners cite economic factors as the reason for their decision. In 2008, they added foreclosures to the list.

The numbers have risen in recent years.

Last year alone, more than 350 pets were turned over to that center due to foreclosures, the expense of owning a pet or because the owner no longer had a home.

The Salem shelter got a call recently from a man who was losing his home and had to give up a dog he had for five years.

"He was crying the whole time," Laurie McCannon of the Northeast Animal Shelter said. "It was not a choice he wanted to make ... but what could he do? He was losing his home."

Heidi Roberts of the Friends of Beverly Animals took in two cats last month from a woman who was being forced out of her residence.

"The woman is homeless," she said. "She ended up in a rooming house."

It is one thing, officials said, for someone to turn a pet over to a shelter, and quite another to leave it in a box in the middle of a supermarket parking lot. Those owners may think they're doing the right thing, but too often they're putting those animals at risk.

In the Market Basket case, some of the cats got out and were running around the lot between cars, according to Tufts. They appeared to be indoor cats, she said, and were terrified.

"This was probably the first time they were ever outside ..." she said. "Thank God they didn't get hit."

Tufts credited a store employee and the manager, Robert Gallant, with taking the cats inside and caring for them.

If pet owners don't know what to do, they should contact their city or town animal control officer through the local police department, or call an animal shelter or veterinarian for advice, officials said. Several local communities, like Marblehead, have volunteer organizations that can help owners pay for medical care or other services.

Dumping pets is not only wrong, officials said, it's illegal.

"Animal cruelty abandonment is a felony in Massachusetts," said Adams, the MSPCA-Angell spokesman. "If someone is found guilty of animal cruelty, they can serve up to five years in prison and be fined up to \$2,500."

Tufts asked anyone with information about the Market Basket incident to call the Marblehead police at 781-631-1212.

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