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Keeping your pet through the recession



Deborah Thomas and her pet, Armand, in Thomas' New York apartment. Thomas is deciding how to care for Armand with his increasing vet costs. (Laurie Rich/CNS)

By Laurie Rich
COLUMBIA NEWS SERVICE
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NEW YORK -- When Deborah Thomas brought her sickly 10-year-old cat, Armand, to a New York City vet last month, she discovered the tan-and-white shorthair had kidney disease and needed to be hospitalized for three days. But the real shock came when she got a bill for \$2,000.

"I've never spent \$2,000 on anything in my life," says Thomas, a part-time music teacher in the New York public schools.

Now, in addition to chipping away at this amount every month on her credit card, she's paying \$50 a week for medication to

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maintain the cat's health. But she doesn't know how much longer she can afford to give him this kind of care.

With the U.S. economy in shambles, those who used to be able to care for their pets financially are now drowning in other expenses. They're stuck with tough decisions that pit their own welfare against that of their dog or cat, forcing many to abandon their pets.

But animal lovers can find ways to cut costs and minimize the burden so they don't have to say a permanent farewell to Felix or Fido, say veterinarians and rescue organizations. They all recommend doing something that's often embarrassing for those in dire straits: Ask for help.

The economic downturn has overwhelmed animal shelters nationwide. Some 84 percent of the 11,000 shelters and rescue groups affiliated with Petfinder.com say they have received more animals because of the downturn for reasons including foreclosures, layoffs and "general financial difficulty." The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals projected in February that from 500,000 to 1 million cats and dogs were at risk of becoming homeless.

The threat of overcrowding has spurred some shelters to find ways to help those at risk of abandoning their pets.

King Street Cats, a small, independent cat shelter in Alexandria, Va., started a pet food pantry and has helped board some pets until their owners can take care of them again. Keeping a pet in an owner's home saves the group money.

"It's worth it for everybody all around," says Allie Phillips, the organization's president, who recommends that struggling owners contact their local shelters for assistance.

Bettie Stephens called King Street in January to give away her two cats-Duckie, a six-toed Hemingway cat, and A.J., who is black-and-white-after being forced to vacate her house and move into an apartment that didn't allow animals. Stephens had been put on indefinite unpaid leave from her government job and couldn't afford her mortgage.

When she told shelter workers about her situation, they said they'd board the cats for free if she thought she could take them back soon. After relinquishing her pets, Stephens visited every weekend, which is when the shelter is open.

At the end of March, Stephens started working again. She moved back to her home last Saturday and picked up the cats the next day.

"It is great to have us all home finally," Stephens said on Sunday, reporting that after running up and down the stairs, AJ was sleeping on her desk and Duckie was headed for her bed. She said she was "just trying to get some sense of normalcy" back to her life.

For those looking to cut costs, there are ways to save on food and veterinary bills, animal

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experts say. Pet owners spent an average of \$217 a year to feed their dogs and \$188 for their cats, according to a 2007-2008 American Pet Products Association survey.

Just feeding an animal the right amount of food may reduce expenses, says Jason Merrihew, spokesman for the American Animal Hospital Association. Many owners overfeed their pets, leading to obesity, which can result in costly medical problems. But before changing a pet's diet in any way, owners should first talk to a veterinarian.

It might seem cheap to give a pet table scraps or try and make your own food, but doing this could rob the animal of vital nutrients, say veterinary nutritionists Andrea Fascetti of the University of California, Davis, and Tony Buffington of Ohio State University. If owners do want to explore this option, Fascetti recommends using recipes at acvn.org, while Buffington likes balanceit.com. These concoctions aren't cheap-these recipes list high-end ingredients like pork loin and skinless chicken breast.

Many owners, however, find veterinary costs are the most difficult to swing.

Thomas, whose cat had the \$2,000 vet bill and receives twice-weekly \$25 medication, continues to mull what she should do. She refuses to give Armand up and says he's way too healthy otherwise to be put to sleep, despite some family pressure to do so. She's thinking of switching vets or getting a second opinion to see if giving the medicine once a week will suffice.

At Urban Veterinary Care in Chicago, customers are calling more rather than bringing their pets in for an office visit they'd have to pay for, says Adrian Garibay, a veterinary technician. Many are requesting only the basic vaccines and are holding off on getting X-rays and blood work, waiting to see if their pet recovers on its own.

Susan Nelson, a small-animal veterinarian at Kansas State University, offers a few tips for at-home care for some common ailments. For mild cuts, Nelson suggests owners trim hair near the wound then cleanse it with mild soap and put on a triple-antibiotic skin ointment. She recommends a bland diet for pets with diarrhea as long as they do not have blood in their stool and are acting normally.

If a pet needs major surgery or costly medicine, some organizations offer grant programs to cover costs. These include the Pet Fund (thepetfund.com) and the association's program (aahahelpingpets.org). Requests for the group's grant fund have tripled in the last four to five months, Merrihew says. Some university veterinary clinics also have grant programs, like Washington State University's Good Samaritan Fund.

All the animal experts interviewed recommend preventative measures-everything from removing hazards in the home, exercise, keeping vaccinations current and obedience training-so pets aren't as likely to need expensive care.

"The ignored pet is the potentially costly pet," says Charlie Powell, spokesman for the College of Veterinary Medicine at Washington State University.

E-mail: lmr2154@columbia.edu

(EDITORS: There is no charge for use of this article or photos, but please send a tearsheet to Professor David Blum, Columbia News Service, Graduate School of Journalism, 2950

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