

# Animal shelters are seeing a surge in adoptions, as rescue pets and their new owners help each other cope with the coronavirus pandemic

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By LORI RILEY and KASSI JACKSON  
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As more and more folks find themselves isolated at home, some are turning to shelters for furry companionship, or to find a way to give back in this time of need.

“I clearly saw an upward trend of adoptions after the virus hit,” said Noranne Nielsen, Mansfield animal control officer. “People are home more. They are thinking like, ‘Oh, it’s pretty boring here, maybe we should adopt a pet.’”

The Mansfield Animal Shelter is empty, something unusual for any time but Christmas Nielsen said.

Animal shelters and rescues in the state of Connecticut are considered essential, but social distancing mandates have changed their operations. Pets are still able to be adopted, but the process is strictly online and within safe social distancing parameters.

“A lot more people are asking to adopt,” said Tori Cateni, the co-founder of Pack Leaders, out of East Hartford. “The major difference is we used to have people come meet the dog at PetSmart. Now adoptions are taking place at our facility. We’re doing it outside. [All of the paperwork and payment] is done ahead of time. It’s more just handing them off.”



The Mansfield Animal Shelter had no cats or dogs left for adoption as of April 1. Mansfield Animal Control officer Noranne Nielsen: "I clearly saw an upward trend of adoptions after the virus hit." (HANDOUT)

The Humane Society, as well as other rescues like Dog Star, based in Bloomfield, have resorted to online events through resources like Zoom, Facebook Live and even YouTube.

“I’ve never seen this before in rescue, but we actually have more demand than we have supply,” Dog Star president Dan McCabe said.

In addition to an increase in fosters, more people are coming forward to foster animals, something that has been helpful as shelters and rescues prepare for a possible influx of animal surrenders due to illness, death and the economic strain of the coronavirus.

“They told us we have to avoid taking in animals now, like owner surrenders that can wait,” Nielsen said. “At the peak of the pandemic, in 2-3 weeks, they are foreseeing an increase in animals to go to the shelters, either because people die or they have to go to the hospital. We have to be prepared for that influx.”



Rhea, a 12-week-old cattle dog/Pitbull mix, recently joined the family of Allison O'Brien and her fiancé Cody Forrest, and her big fur-sister, Luna. (Kassi Jackson/The Hartford Courant)

With the sun shining and the skies clear, 1-year-old Catahoula mix Luna rolls around the front yard with her new 12-week-old fur-sister, Rhea, a cattle dog, Pitbull mix.

Both teachers, Allison O'Brien and her fiancé Cody Forrest were planning on getting a dog this summer after their June wedding, so they could be home all summer to train their new pup. O'Brien said they decided that if they were going to be stuck at home — and especially with the June wedding up in the air— they were going to get a puppy now. Within a couple weeks, they were on their way to a Milford rest stop to pick up their new pup, Rhea.

“So her name actually has a story,” O'Brien said. ”Luna,' you know, means 'moon,' and we were looking for a lighter dog — like a sun and a moon —[so] what could we name her? And [Cody] said 'Rhea,' like a 'ray of sunshine' [because] we all need a little ray of sunshine right now.”

The two said she's been a great distraction from everything going on and gives them more reason to get outside, acknowledging that Rhea has also been great for Luna.

Forrest said their biggest and most comical concern right now is running out of paper towels while potty training.

“[Adopting] was definitely a good move,” Forrest said. “If people are thinking about it, just do it.”



Melanie Sweet holds 4-year-old Chihuahua/pug mix Nola as she gets a kiss from 8-year-old Chihuahua/greyhound mix Honey, who is held by Sweet's boyfriend, Michael Orozco. (Kassi Jackson/The Hartford Courant)

As Melanie Sweet and her boyfriend Michael Orozco navigate being laid off from their restaurant work, they decided that with their newfound free time there was no better way to give back than taking in a mother-daughter Chihuahua mix duo from Protector of Animals.

Protector of Animals has a small dog kennel out of East Hamden, and Sweet said she told them if they were looking for anyone to foster — or adopt — she has “plenty of time” on her hands.

The process was quick — though thorough — and Sweet said working with them has been wonderful, saying that they check in with them daily and do all they can to ensure their foster homes don't have to go out for supplies.

“I don't know what it's like to foster animals before all this,” she said. “But it's great, [the Protector of Animals rescue] gives you all [the animal's] food for a

month, all their medications for a month, they give you all their paperwork you could possibly need if anything happens.”

Honey, 8 years old, and her daughter Nola, 4, have been in the care of Sweet and Orozco for around two weeks, and have stolen their hearts.

In the back room of her house, Humane Society foster mom Linda Bilodeau has mama cat Ellie and her five 2-month-old kittens Emma, Elvis, Edith, Eve and Eliza.

Bilodeau has been fostering for around six years, taking in both cats and dogs.

“Fostering is a great way to get to know different animals other than your own,” Bilodeau said. “You kind of have a chance to enjoy some pets, and then they go back and somebody else gets to enjoy them. You get a variety of different animals; it’s a lot of fun.”

Ellie and her five kittens are keeping her busy though. In a typical day-to-day, once the kittens reach two months of age, they go back to the shelter to be adopted out, but COVID-19 and social distancing has changed that model.

“We just keep doing what we’re doing,” Bilodeau said of the change. “For us, it means that the kittens are more rambunctious.”

The kittens have only been in one room their whole life, as they aren’t able to be around adult animals (other than their mother) until they’re fully vaccinated. Bilodeau has her own adult pets, so the kittens are still not able to expand beyond their back-room space.

“It’s nice because they are keeping us busy and we’ve enjoyed their company,” Bilodeau said.

Over a year ago, Sydney Lyons saw a Facebook post for an immediate need for foster homes for an emergency rescue of 12 dogs who would be euthanized the following morning in a Tennessee shelter. A UConn college student, she reached out to Memphis-based Mutt Mafia Dog Rescue saying, “I’m in Connecticut; I don’t

know if you can get a dog from Tennessee to me, but if you can, just send one my way.” And she hasn’t stopped ever since.

Nearly two weeks ago she picked up a 12-week-old pitbull mix medical case, Winston — her first puppy.

“Recently, with everything with [COVID-19] going on, now that I’m home ... I can take on puppies,” Lyons said.

Because of Lyons’ continued involvement with the Tennessee rescue, she has been given the title and responsibilities of “Adoption Coordinator of Connecticut,” as she screens applications, does meet-and-greets and helps furry friends find their forever homes.

Lyons said that right now, their rescue doesn’t have enough puppies for the amount of adoptions coming in. “We have like 10 apps per puppy right now,” she said.

She said she thinks a lot of people are stuck at home and they’re lonely, sharing that she recently adopted a dog to a family in a special circumstance, and the family has shared with Lyons how much their new dog has saved them and helped them through the current situation.

“I think right now, more than ever, people want pets in their life,” Lyons said. “And it’s the perfect time to train a puppy, or even an adult dog to get the acclimated because everyone is home.”



Maya Rose plays with her 4-month-old Chihuahua/beagle mix, Moose, while the older family dog and big fur-brother, Frodo, tries to get in on some play time, also. (Kassi Jackson/The Hartford Courant)

Boston University freshman Maya Rose found her first year away at college coming to an abrupt halt as school closed and she moved back home with her parents.

With her newfound free time, Rose thought there was no better time to convince her parents to bring a new puppy into the home. Her method of persuasion?

“She gave us a whole PowerPoint presentation,” her dad Jack Dougherty said.

“It wasn’t that hard though,” Rose said of her efforts to convince them.

They found the 4-month-old chihuahua beagle mix, affectionately dubbed “Moose,” at the Where the Love Is Shelter in Hamden.

Moose joined the house with big brother Frodo, a Shiba Inu mix, and the two get to share the fenced front yard of the corner lot the family lives on. Dougherty and



Rose both said that a lot of people get to enjoy the puppy from a distance, as they walk by.

“The shelter’s name is Where the Love Is, so we’re just trying to share the love,” Dougherty said.



Mona Teitelbaum of Coventry is a teacher at Solomon Schechter Day School in West Hartford and her husband Jeremy is a professor at UConn. When their respective schools were shut down by the coronavirus pandemic, Mona decided she wanted a dog, since their dog had died two months ago. They found Millie at the Humane Society in Waterford March 14. (HANDOUT)

Mona Teitelbaum of Coventry had just learned that her school would be closed and she would be undertaking distance learning with her students.

“It was so bizarre,” she said. “I thought, ‘I need something to distract me.’”

“It came to me like a bolt: We are going to get a dog now. I said to my husband, ‘We’re getting a dog.’ And he was like, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re right. That’s what we’re doing.’ That was Thursday.”

Friday, March 13, was the last day of school. That night, Mona and her husband Jeremy, who is a professor at UConn, looked for dogs on the internet. Saturday, they were driving to the Connecticut Humane Society in Waterford.

Miley, a 1-year-old Lab/hound mix, caught their eye. They went out into the parking lot to think about it. That's when Mona noticed the cars pulling in, full of families. She's not the type to make a quick decision but she did this day.

"I told my husband, 'We're wasting valuable minutes, we have to go in and tell them yes,'" she said.

That was two weeks ago. Miley is now Millie.

"Oh my gosh," Mona said. "She's really kept us busy. We are both working. I guess everybody's going on long walks but the dog is making us do that even more."

The Teitelbaums had thought about getting a dog after their 16-year-old dog Rosie died a few months ago. But they put it off, until they realized they would both be home for a while.

"It refocuses your mind," Mona said. "When I'm out there playing ball with her, I do have to tell you I'm not thinking about the pandemic. That was exactly what the intention was."



Marion Leonard of Manchester and her husband Jack adopted Marty, who came on a transport from Louisiana, on March 21 through Labs4Rescue. The Leonards retired last year and were watching their grandson part-time before the coronavirus struck but now they are at home full time and wanted to have a dog again. (HANDOUT)

Jack Leonard and his wife Marion of Manchester both retired a year ago with the intention of taking care of their grandson Curtis on a part-time basis.

But they had to stop babysitting when the coronavirus pandemic became widespread.

They had been looking for a Labrador retriever for about a year. Their last Lab died two years ago.

One happened to pop up on the Killingworth-based Labs4rescue site (where they got other dogs in the past) which interested them.

On March 21, they were picking up Marty (formerly Martin No. 9) at a commuter lot in Glastonbury.

“Our intention was not to adopt a Lab to occupy our time now,” Jack said. “It’s simply worked out really, really well. We are now able to direct all of the attention we would have normally focused on our 18-month-old grandchild to focus on this 5-year-old knucklehead, to get him to calm down, to get comfortable in the house, either relearn or learn some new commands.

“We’re both retired and now we’re stuck at home, so that makes it perfect. We can give this dog who otherwise may have been euthanized all of the care and attention he deserves.”



Lori Riley



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Lori Riley has been a sportswriter at the Courant for 25 years, covering everything from high school sports to UConn women’s basketball. She also writes a Sunday column. She grew up in Hollis, N.H., and went to Rutgers University, where she earned a degree in journalism and cut her teeth working at the Daily Targum. She worked at the Times of Trenton and the Asbury Park Press, covering high school, college and professional sports including the Yankees, Mets and Giants, before coming to Hartford. She is a married mom of two, and enjoys numerous outdoor sports including running, horseback riding, cycling and kayaking.

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