



Comforting the innocents

or what you can do to help the rabbits in your local shelter by Susan Easton

Most people venture to their local animal shelter either as good samaritans turing in a stray animal, in search of a new pet, or to discard one they no longer want or. Rarely do folks go with the intent of visiting the rabbits there and improving their lives, although I believe this is an important but unfortunately all-too-rare way to volunteer.

I work for the Montgomery County shelter part-time, conducting home visits and interviews for people who have applied to adopt rabbits. When I mention to folks that I work for the shelter, often their response is, "Oh, how can you do that? I can't even go to the shelter. It's just so sad." Or they say, "I could never visit the shelter; I would want to adopt them all!"

Okay, you're right, it is sad. It's heartbreaking that so many rabbits are without homes and end up in the shelter. However, if you feel strongly enough about homeless rabbits to feel such sadness, why not allow that feeling to become the impetus for helping them? Believe me, there are many ways to help those little unfortunates besides flat-out adopting them.

First off, go visit your local shelter and check out the rabbit situation. Observe how the rabbits are housed, what they are fed, whether they are given litterboxes and toys and what litter is used. Make a list of what types of food or supplies are lacking. Go and buy those items and donate them to the shelter, and specify that they are for the rabbits.

You can get what my shelter calls a "kennel clearance," which enables you to handle the animals. With the shelter's permission, you can pet and hold the rabbits to help socialize them; if you trance one on your lap, you are guaranteed to draw a crowd!

Grooming is another way to help; often rabbits come into the shelter with horribly long nails or matted fur. Be sure to ask about any rabbits in the shelter's "sick room" or in quarantine; you don't want to forget them.

If the shelter allows, jot short comments about your interactions with the rabbits on their cage cards; for example, if somebun really likes having his head scratched, write it on the card. Obviously, focus only on the positive and never make negative comments like "scratches and kicks" or is "shy"; those may well become a death sentence.

Also, you may be the first person to notice that a rabbit is sick, so don't be shy about reporting it to the shelter so they can take the animal to a vet as quickly as possible.

Even just hanging around in the rabbit room at busy times such as Saturday afternoon is helpful; you are available to answer questions and share your experiences with potential adopters, other rabbit owners and just curious browsers. It is a prime opportunity to educate people on the lesser-known aspects of having a rabbit, such as they can use a litterbox and like to play with toys.

Let your shelter know that you have experience with rabbits and are interested in helping out. After expressing my willingness to help, I was given the opportunity to do presentations for the teenage volunteers on rabbits (and to my joy, noticed a marked increase in the attention they gave to the rabbits after that). If I hadn't offered my services, the opportunity would never have come up.

Keep the shelter in your thoughts. When you hear a friend, co-worker, relative or even a stranger you happen to be sitting next to mention they are going to buy a rabbit from a pet store, refer them to the shelter instead. Most people are surprised to hear the shelter adopts out rabbits.

Well, they do!



Susan Easton examines a shelter rabbit and gives her some love.

Editor's note: Susan Easton is a fosterer and educator with the House Rabbit Society. She also works part time with the Montgomery County shelter. ♡

Why do rabbits end up in the shelter?

In fiscal 1999, which ended in June, Montgomery County Humane Society received 161 live rabbits, more than two-thirds of which were give-ups (105) and 56 were strays. About half (83) were adopted and the remainder were euthanized, for a rabbit adoption rate of 56%. The shelter's overall adoption rate for all animals was 64%.

The most frequently cited reason for taking a rabbit to the shelter, by far, was "no time," given by 38 owners. Then came a tie between "allergies" and "too many," reasons given by 16 people apiece. Six people said they were "moving," and four said the rabbit was "aggressive." Reasons cited by just one or two people include "landlord," "too big," "travel," "litter," "cost," "sheds," "new baby," "child problems," "other pet" and the animal was a gift.

Compare the MCHS rabbit adoption rate to that for other small animals in FY 1999: 100% for ferrets; 99% for guinea pigs; 71% for hamsters; 68% for rats; 43% for gerbils; and only 5% for mice.