

## The Future is Equine: the new paradigm in horse rescue

By Jessica Harris, MS

At GFAS our goal is to help sanctuaries help animals. Under our umbrella fall not only groups that exclusively provide lifetime sanctuary, but also those who rescue, rehabilitate, and rehome animals in need. The beauty of our work is seeing all the ways organizations *can* help animals. We know how hard it is to see all the ways our society falls short of protecting them. We see the strength of having a variety of groups serving different at-risk populations and with unique missions fulfilling those needs. We also know that horses represent a singular challenge – and also a rare opportunity.

Unlike most other animals, it is hard to pin down our relationship with horses. Are they working animals, livestock, companion animals, or some combination thereof? This is more than a philosophical or scientific conundrum – this question creates huge rifts among horse lovers as to how horses should be handled and policy challenges that historically have been difficult to bridge. The animals' size and cost of care create even further demands on those willing or able to help them.

There is however, one great advantage. In terms of the number of unwanted horses in the United States, estimates indicate about 200,000 horses annually in need of placement as of 2017. Compared to the billions of farmed animals in need of rescue or the 6.5 million cats and dogs still entering shelters during the same time period, the number of horses represents a soluble problem. Recent research indicates that there are up to 1.2 million prospective homes for horses in the United States. If we take an even more conservative figure by considering only experienced horse adopters, the figure still hovers at 720,000. This number represents a very exciting potential for helping horses.

We know that these figures and goals may still seem abstract and speculative. But the truth is, the approach to managing these numbers is not new. Companion animal sheltering has experienced a major overhaul in the last 20 years, with enormous strides largely on the basis of high-powered adoption and community programs in the last decade. In 2011, an estimated 7.2 million dogs and cats entered U.S shelters and 2.6 million were euthanized. In the last 2-3 years, those numbers have dropped by a *million* animals per year, and adoptions have reached an astounding 3.2 million in addition to close to a million stray animals being reunited with their owners. These figures are hard to comprehend, but the key piece is that *something* happened in the last decade that is saving millions of lives. That something is revolutionary thinking in how we approach finding homes for unwanted animals.

We know that horses and companion animals have distinct needs and challenges and that the solutions to finding them homes may not look exactly the same. But they are also not completely different; it is worth learning from the hard-earned lessons of those in companion animal sheltering and implementing successful principles for equines. These ideas can be distilled into 2 main goals: 1) *increase* the number of horses adopted (where appropriate) in

order to increase capacity for care, 2) *decrease* the number of horses in transition through community support. The programs and strategies for achieving these goals have proven themselves over years in companion animal shelters:

- open, inclusive adoption practices
- extensive and creative outreach to potential adopters
- community programs that help keep horses in homes

and crucially,

- collaboration among equine industries and rescue organizations

GFAS understands well the power of an experienced, dedicated network and wants to help leverage that power to help unwanted horses. We honor those providing lifetime sanctuary for retired horses: your work is *vital*. We respect those investing finances and often years of time in rehabilitating horses that needed that extra TLC and work to get them back to good; your work is *humbling*. And now, we see a fresh way for so many of our groups to help even more equines – through a renewed focus on adoptions and community engagement.

Over the following months, we will be featuring interviews and discussions with GFAS Certified groups who have embraced the shift to more open adoptions and removing barriers to their horses finding homes. You will hear what it has done for their horses and their capacity to rescue, straight from the horses' mouth. This opportunity for growth, coupled with the determination and expertise of our equine groups, has the potential to change equine welfare for good. Let's come together to create a brighter future for horses.

## Sources

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