

Working With Rescues to Establish Best Practices and Safety Nets for Early Problem Solving

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Veterinarians may work with rescue organizations to give back to the horse industry, to meet new clients, and to help horses. By helping rescue operations and facilities implement and maintain best practices, they can help alleviate equine suffering. Author's address: Bluebonnet Equine Humane Society, PO Box 632, College Station, TX 77841-0632; e-mail: jenn@bluebonnetequine.com. © 2016 AAEP.

1. Introduction

In the past 10 years, the number of equine rescue facilities in the United States has rapidly increased. These rescues range from structured, tax-exempt organizations governed by a Board of Directors (BOD) to private rescues run by an individual or family. Most rescuers start out with good intentions: to help needy horses. Unfortunately, some rescuers do not utilize best practices for rescue and equine care, and they end up becoming part of the problem. Their horses are seized due to neglect, causing the horses unnecessary suffering and costing communities additional monies in investigations and court expenses.

In the past few years, authorities in multiple states have seized emaciated horses from rescue organizations and individuals who claim to have rescued the horses. The horses in these cases have suffered from a lack of food and water and insufficient veterinary care. In most cases, horses came from bad situations and simply were not given an opportunity to regain lost weight or

find veterinary care, although in some cases horses actually lost weight while with the rescue organization.

Equine rescues can fail in their mission due for many reasons, but the primary reasons are poor understanding of nonprofit structure and management, lack of knowledge of equine care, insufficient funding, over commitment, and the inability to turn a needy horse away.

Although the American Association of Equine Practitioners, the Animal Welfare Institute and Humane Society of the United States, the University of California–Davis, and several other organizations have published guidelines for horse rescues, most rescue organizations are not aware of these standards and thus do not follow them.

Veterinarians can help alleviate the suffering inadvertently caused by well-meaning rescuers by working with these organizations to insure they follow good equine husbandry and nonprofit management guidelines. When local rescues become problem rescues, veterinarians can work with local

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law enforcement; other veterinarians; and stable, sustainable rescue organizations to assist the horses.

2. Identifying Good Rescues

Good rescue organizations provide critical services to the horse industry and to their communities. They often take in horses no one else wants, they rehabilitate horses from neglect cases, they tame and train wild/unhandled horses, and they retrain abused horses and those with behavioral problems. They save local communities funds by helping law enforcement agencies to investigate neglect cases, educate owners about proper horse care to reduce neglect due to ignorance, and provide manpower and facilities for housing horses when seizures are necessary.

There is a great deal of variation in the size, mission, and structure of rescue organizations. Some house all of their horses at one or two facilities whereas other organizations house their horses at foster homes. Some organizations take in only a few horses each year whereas others take in over a hundred horses per year. Some rescue organizations have paid staff and others are completely volunteer run. Rescues may focus on a particular breed or type of horse, a particular source of horses (neglect cases, auction purchases, owner surrenders, etc.), or horses with specific needs (horses with behavioral problems, those with medical needs, etc.).

Rescues may be set up as a 501(c)(3), tax-exempt organization. To achieve 501(c)(3) status, the rescue must have a BOD, be incorporated in the state it operates in, and submit paperwork and a fee to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). The rescue must submit annual reports to the IRS to maintain its status, and financial records of the organization must be open to the public. Donations made to 501(c)(3) organizations are tax-deductible.

Some rescuers decide to forego the 501(c)(3) status and instead operate as private rescues. They do not have to incorporate or submit reports to the IRS, and they do not have to maintain open books. Donations made to these rescues are not tax deductible, but the individuals running the rescue may be required to report income from the rescue (such as donations, adoption fees, proceeds from fundraisers, etc.) as personal income and pay taxes on it.

Regardless of the specific structure or mission, good rescue organizations share several traits.

Transparency

Good rescue organizations are transparent with their foundational documents. This includes their IRS Determination letter (which grants them 501(c)(3) status), annual form 990 (financial report to the IRS), bylaws, and articles of incorporation. They also have published policies that govern the details of how their organization operates: adoptions, foster home management, veterinary care, etc.

Although many rescues do not publish their physical location because they do not want drop-in visi-

tors or horses abandoned at their gates, they do have accessible email addresses and phone numbers. They return calls and emails in a timely manner, although it may take a few days to return calls and emails given that many are operated by volunteers. Everyone should avoid rescues that do not return calls or emails in a timely fashion.

Good rescues also are transparent about the horses in their care. They provide the public with the number of horses that enter their program each year, are adopted out, are returned by adopters, and that died or were euthanized. They also provide information on where their horses come from (negligent owners, animal control transfers, owner surrenders, etc.). Veterinary records are available for potential adopters, and they are willing to disclose any health or behavior problems.

Good Husbandry

All horses at reputable rescues receive vaccinations recommended for their area, an annual Coggins test, annual dental care, routine de-worming, and routine farrier care. Exceptions can be made for horses that are too frightened or wild to treat. However, the rescue should have experienced handlers working with these horses to help them achieve a level of training that is safe for them and their handlers.

Illnesses and lameness should be diagnosed and treated in a timely manner. Good rescues are willing to have horses euthanized who cannot recover from illness or lameness on the advice of a veterinarian. Ideally, the organization will have a policy that governs the decision making on treatment and/or euthanasia. That policy should set the stage for managers of the organization to make pragmatic and humane decisions in these situations.

Good rescues provide hay, grain, and water of sufficient quality and quantity to help healthy horses maintain their weight and to help emaciated horses safely gain weight. They provide feed and feeding regimens tailored to each equine's unique needs.

Good rescues may have skinny and ill horses at their facilities, and they may also have horses that are difficult to handle. They should be able to document how long the horse has been with the rescue and show that the horse is improving. They should have and follow a plan for physical rehabilitation and training for each horse in the rescue.

The facilities do not need to be state of the art, but reputable rescues have clean facilities with sufficient space for each equine. Fences are in good repair, and there is plenty of appropriate shelter available. The facilities are designed to avoid injuries to horses and to keep handlers and visitors safe.

Fiscal Responsibility

Running a rescue takes money, and responsible rescues have sound, sustainable finances. They maintain an annual budget and adjust the budget each year as needed. They receive funds from a variety

of sources, and they work hard to keep their expenses low while at the same time providing quality care to their equines.

Well-run rescues have savings to cover emergencies, and they are not constantly in crisis: threatening to close down or unable to feed the horses because of a lack of funds. They strive to expand their donor base, and they thank donors promptly.

Financial responsibility is not left in the hands of just one or two people: good rescues employ checks and balances to make sure money is being spent appropriately. The BOD should review and approve the annual budget. The person responsible for making deposits should be separate from the person responsible for writing checks. Someone other than the treasurer should review the financial records on a routine basis. More than one person should be on all bank accounts.

For rescues with paid staff, the salaries should be appropriate for the responsibilities and the location, but exorbitant salaries are a sign of problems.

Sound Adoption Policies

Unless the organization is a sanctuary where horses go to live out the remainder of their lives, one goal of reputable rescue organizations is to make good adoption matches. Before an organization puts a horse up for adoption, they make sure the horse's veterinary and farrier care are current and that the horse's training level is assessed. Good rescues disclose any known health, lameness, or behavioral problems. Good rescues are willing to take an adopted horse back if it does not work out for its adopter or if the adopter cannot keep his horse regardless of how long ago the horse was adopted. They also adopt horses out with no breeding contracts and follow up to insure that horses are working out in their new homes. Good rescues require adopters to sign an adoption contract, and they enforce their contracts fairly for all adopters.

Willingness to Learn and Improve

Good rescues know that they can always improve their operation, so they are willing to learn. They attend animal welfare conferences when available and seek education from reputable equine magazines, their farriers, and their veterinarians. They work with respected trainers and clinicians and seek training for their volunteers and foster homes.

Good Reputation

Finally, good rescues have a good reputation with others in their area. Veterinarians, farriers, law enforcement, animal control officers, feed store owners, and trainers know who they are. Their adopters and volunteers are happy, and they have repeat adopters and long-term volunteers. There is always some volunteer turnover in rescue as volunteers move, get busy with jobs or families, or lose interest in horses or rescue. However, excessive

volunteer turnover is a sign of internal problems in the organization.

The leader of good rescues is qualified to run the organization. He or she is well-educated on equine care and training, and he or she seeks qualified advisories in areas of nonprofit management. The leader should have a good reputation with the volunteers of the organization and the public.

Commitment to Donors, Volunteers, and Horses

Good rescue organizations honor their commitment to their donors by using donated funds wisely. They compare prices on items and services to get the best price. They seek discounted or donated services when possible. When donors designate a gift be used for a specific purpose, it is.

Good rescue organizations honor their commitment to their volunteers. They make sure the work environment is safe and appropriate. They provide training or mentoring to volunteers, and they are willing to move volunteers to different jobs to help them find the best fit. They listen to volunteers and make adjustments to volunteer schedules and tasks as possible.

Good rescue organizations honor their commitment to their horses by making their care a priority. They follow reasonable standards of care and provide safe housing. They work with veterinarians to diagnose and treat illnesses, injuries, and lameness. If a horse is suffering and his pain cannot be reasonably relieved, they authorize their veterinarian to euthanize the horse.

3. Working With Existing Rescues

Veterinarians can help good rescues become even better organizations in several ways. One way is to provide discounted veterinary services when possible. No organization should expect or demand free or discounted veterinary services, but they appreciate veterinarians who offer discounts, even if only on occasion. Rescues have a responsibility to their donors to use donated money wisely and they have a responsibility to the horses at their facility now and those that need them in the future. Veterinarians who can help rescues through discounted or donated veterinary services help donations go further, enabling more horses to receive the help they need.

Some veterinarians offer a discount on their services to rescues they work with, and others set up a vaccination clinic where they offer free or heavily discounted vaccinations for the rescue horses 1 day per year. Veterinarians may also recommend that rescues they work with apply to receive vaccinations for their horses from the Unwanted Veterinary Relief Campaign.

Providing veterinary services is just one way veterinarians can work with rescues. They can also work with rescues that provide law enforcement assistance, serve on the BOD, serve on an advisory board, or work with rescues to educate the public on proper horse care.

When working with rescue organizations that assist law enforcement in seizing horses, the veterinarian may provide an expert opinion on whether a seizure is warranted based on the condition of the horse(s), may attend the seizure to assess and treat horses on site, and/or may assess the horses once they've been moved to a holding facility awaiting court. Expert witness testimony provided by veterinarians can be critical to a successful court case.

Given that good rescues are always willing to learn and improve, veterinarians can educate rescues about best practices in equine care. This may include offering suggestions on revisions to policy on standards of care, veterinary care, euthanasia, etc. as well as sharing information about the latest research in diseases, lameness, and refeeding.

For veterinarians who would like to get more involved in a rescue operation, there are two options: serving on the BOD or the advisory board. The BOD is the legally and fiscally responsible governance of the organization. It sets the policies and insures that staff (employees and volunteers) adhere to those policies. It hires or appoints the Executive Director, and it insures that the organization works toward its mission. The BOD is responsible for making sure the rescue has the funds needed to operate through setting a reasonable budget, participating in fundraising activities, and making an annual contribution to the organization. By serving on a rescue's BOD, veterinarians can help devise and implement best practices for rescues and oversee the care the rescue's horses receive.

BOD members have a responsibility to put the organization first in all transactions and to disclose any conflicts of interests to the organization. Because serving on the BOD carries legal responsibilities, anyone considering serving on a rescue's BOD should make sure the organization carries directors and officers' insurance.

The advisory board is a less-formal group of individuals who offer advice to the organization. They do not have the ability to make decisions about the governance of the organization, but they share their expertise with the BOD and Executive Director and may help establish or run programs for the organization. In general, serving on an advisory board is a less-formal and time-consuming option than serving on the BOD.

Veterinarians can work with rescue organizations to educate the public and help horses in their local communities. There are several ways to make this happen. Veterinarians can present information on proper horse care to the public at a rescue event. Veterinarians may donate or discount their time to put on low-cost vaccination and/or Coggins clinics. Rescues and veterinarians can partner to distribute information on good horse care at events in their area.

Veterinarians who would like to financially contribute to a rescue organization can do so with cash donations, gift certificates, or items for silent auc-

tions, or by making a donation in the memory of a client's horse.

4. Preparing a Safety Net

One of the best things a veterinarian can do to help prepare a safety net is to know the rescues in his/her area. They can look for local rescues online and ask clients, veterinarians, and other horse professionals for lists of local rescues and about individuals who foster for rescue organizations. Unless another veterinarian knows and has visited the rescue lately, the veterinarian should review the rescue's website, talk to the rescue's manager or executive director, and visit the rescue. He or she should check to see that the rescue adheres to the practices of good rescues (discussed above), and offer to help underperforming rescues improve their operation through educational opportunities.

Getting to know the law enforcement or animal control officers responsible for equine cases in the area is another important step in preparing a safety net. Veterinarians can offer to assist officers with neglect or abuse investigations at rescue facilities. When rescuers are not providing proper care to the horses at their facility, veterinarians can work with officers to educate rescuers so that they can provide better care for the horses at their facility. If the rescuer is unable or unwilling to provide proper care, veterinarians can assist law enforcement in seizing horses if necessary.

When a veterinarian discovers a rescue that is not caring for its horses and is unwilling to make necessary changes, he or she needs to report the rescue to local law enforcement. Sometimes veterinarians are reluctant to do this because they fear repercussions or loss of business from existing clients. However, these poorly run rescues need to be reported as soon as they're discovered, before they have a chance to acquire, and neglect, more horses.

Veterinarians can work with other veterinarians, rescues, and horse industry members to form a rescue coalition in their community. The coalition can serve several purposes. It allows the horse industry and veterinarians a chance to get to know and keep in touch with local horse rescues, allowing them to spot problems early on. The coalition can offer educational opportunities to horse rescuers, allowing them to improve their operations. The coalition can also work together to aid law enforcement agencies in large-scale rescues, when there are too many horses for any one agency or rescue to handle.

A local rescue coalition aids the rescues by offering educational opportunities and a chance to gain public trust. It allows veterinarians to give back to the horse industry and to protect horses in their communities. It can also serve to get the veterinarian's name in front of potential clients (the rescue's adopters, foster homes, and volunteers). The coali-

tion can save local communities money by aiding law enforcement with neglect cases.

5. Conclusion

Veterinarians can protect the health and welfare of horses living at rescue centers by identifying good rescues in their area, working with those rescues to insure that their horses receive proper care, and assisting law enforcement officers who receive complaints about rescue organizations. By doing this, veterinarians can prevent equine suffering at

the hands of poorly run or overwhelmed rescue organizations.

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Declaration of Ethics

The Author has adhered to the Principles of the Veterinary Medical Ethics of the AVMA.

Conflict of Interest

The Author declares no conflicts of interest.