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Hearts, Hope and Hay

Helping Horses During the Pandemic

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When COVID-19 swept through the United States this spring, the toll on human life and the economy soon followed. As hospitals sprang into action, businesses shuttered and the scramble for provisions began, animal rescue organizations started bracing for the worst, knowing that surrenders and possible starvation weren't far behind.

At Drifter's Hearts of Hope, a 501(c)(3) equine rescue in Franktown, Colorado, Jacqui Avis and Rachelle Nye sought to head this problem off at the pass. As president and director of fundraising for this group, they knew better than most that it's seldom cheap to feed or care for horses, having rescued more than 460 to date.

"We had experienced an increase in owner surrender requests [people who ask to relinquish ownership of a horse to the rescue] and had seen a decrease in people interested in adopting new horses," explained Colleen Fitzpatrick, the group's director of community outreach. "In seeing how the COVID-19 financial impact was affecting the horse community, we set to work on our 'COVID-19 Equine Assistance Program.'"

The idea was simple: Horse owners dealing with COVID-related hardships

could submit an online application for emergency assistance. "The goal of the program is to keep the horses well-fed at home while their owners navigate these uncharted waters," Fitzpatrick continued. "In this way, the rescues are able to continue focusing on owner surrenders with the greatest needs and help additional horses, as well. This provides a bit of a cushion to the horse owners who have been hit hard financially due to the crisis, and gives them some time to get back on their feet."

To get the extra hay and grain needed, Drifter's Hearts of Hope formed alliances with or reached out to groups such as the Dumb Friends League Harmony Equine Center, the Colorado Unwanted Horse Alliance and even Purina, which donated feed coupons. "We also raised money through a Facebook fundraiser, so community donations of money went into it, as well," Fitzpatrick said, noting that the reaction to the program has been "fantastic," with "9-10" families helped to date.

Though the assistance is temporary, it is clearly making the difference in some cases between keeping one's horses and giving them up. "We have received notes of incredible appreciation from those who have received assistance through

the program, and know that the feed has lifted a weight off their shoulders for the time being," Fitzpatrick said.

Tips for Starting an Emergency Hay/Feed Fund

To rescues interested in starting a similar program, Fitzpatrick recommends using an online application through which owners can apply for assistance. "In this way, you can learn more about the horses and their needs and see how to best assist," she said.

Then go out and forge alliances within your community, a move Fitzpatrick called "instrumental to success." For example, Drifter's Hearts for Hope maintains contact with Colorado Horse Rescue to determine which of the two organizations can best address certain needs. "We have also applied for additional grants and other funding because we want to ensure that we can do everything we can to help the local horse community through these challenging times," she said.

In the end, it's all about helping each other and the horses we love. As Fitzpatrick commented, "In times of crisis, we often look to our neighbors for help, and we are happy to be as helpful as we can be to other rescue groups!"

Tips and Resources in the Time of Coronavirus

Here's a mini-guide for horse owners affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information, visit the United Horse Coalition at unitedhorsecoalition.org.

Whether you keep a horse yourself or board one elsewhere, chances are you have been affected by the novel coronavirus/COVID-19. Here are some additional tips and links to assist horse owners financially strapped by the pandemic.

To help reduce costs, the United Horse Coalition offers the following suggestions:

- Turn out your horses as much as possible to save on the costs of feed, hay and bedding.
- Increase hay consumption and decrease grain and supplements as much as possible.
- Discuss with your farrier the possibility of pulling shoes on your shod horses.
- Reach out to others and share resources! There's no time like now for community collaboration.

Do you need to stop riding?

As long as you feel healthy and observe reasonable precautions—and as long as your facility is open—you might consider continuing with your routine. We know that exercise is good for both you and your horse at this difficult time. However, be careful to comply with any local and state orders and use common sense if riding from a barn used by others:

- Try to arrange your ride times so you aren't sharing space at the barn with a lot of other people (online signup logs are useful here).
- If making payments for board or lessons, try to do so in advance over the phone or via the internet.
- Ride outside in the sun if at all possible, and maintain a healthy

distance from other riders (no side-by-side riding).

- Observe the six-foot distance rule and refrain from hanging around in the aisle or tack room for chit-chat. If you must participate in lessons, make sure the groups are small and that the horses and riders stay spread out.
- Bring hand sanitizer and wipes with you, and incorporate frequent sanitization into your routine. Touch doorknobs, latches and light switches as little as possible, and also refrain from using the restroom while there.
- Try to reduce or eliminate your use of communal items such as white-board markers, wheelbarrows, pitchforks and brooms.

Other helpful resources:

For a list of coronavirus "best practices" at the barn or schooling venue, visit the American Association of Equine Practitioners **AAEP.org**.

The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (**pathintl.org**) offers some guidelines on biosecurity basics and emergency planning.

The United Horse Coalition is assembling a state-by-state list of emergency assistance resources for horse owners. Visit **unitedhorsecoalition.org**, click on "resource-database" and go to "safety-net-programs-and-resources."

The Ontario Animal Health Network has posted advice for setting up a care plan for your horses should you become ill. Go to **oahn.ca/resources/equine-all** and search for "Caring for Your Horses During a Pandemic." ★



Learn More

Founded in 2014, Drifter's Hearts for Hope is one of many equine rescue organizations registered with "A Home for Every Horse." It is committed to circumventing the horse-slaughter pipeline by giving at-risk horses a second chance at a forever home. For more information about the program, visit **driftersheartsofhope.org**.



A Home For Every Horse

This content was provided by A Home For Every Horse, a resource for nonprofit horse rescues, sanctuaries, and care facilities. Rescue organizations involved with A Home For Every Horse are eligible for many benefits from program sponsors. Learn more at **ahomeforeveryhorse.com**.

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