



Animal Services in New Mexico

*A Needs Assessment
for the North Central Region*

2026

Prepared for

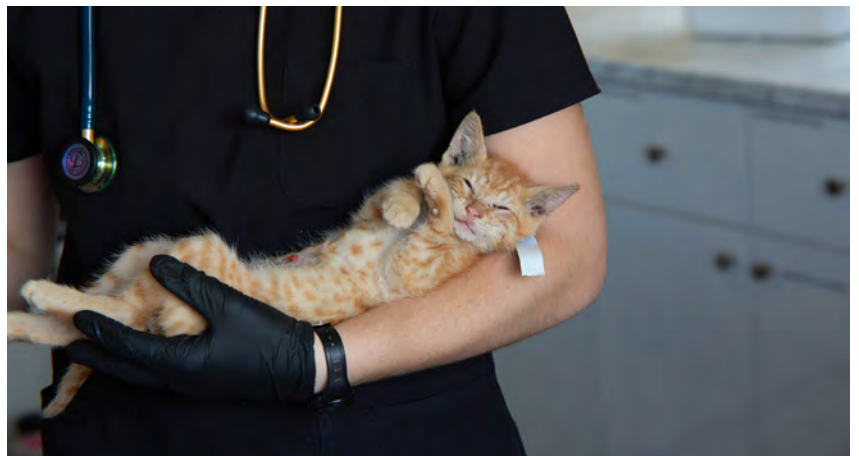
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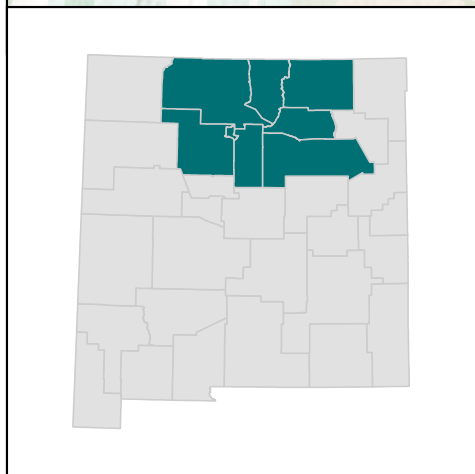
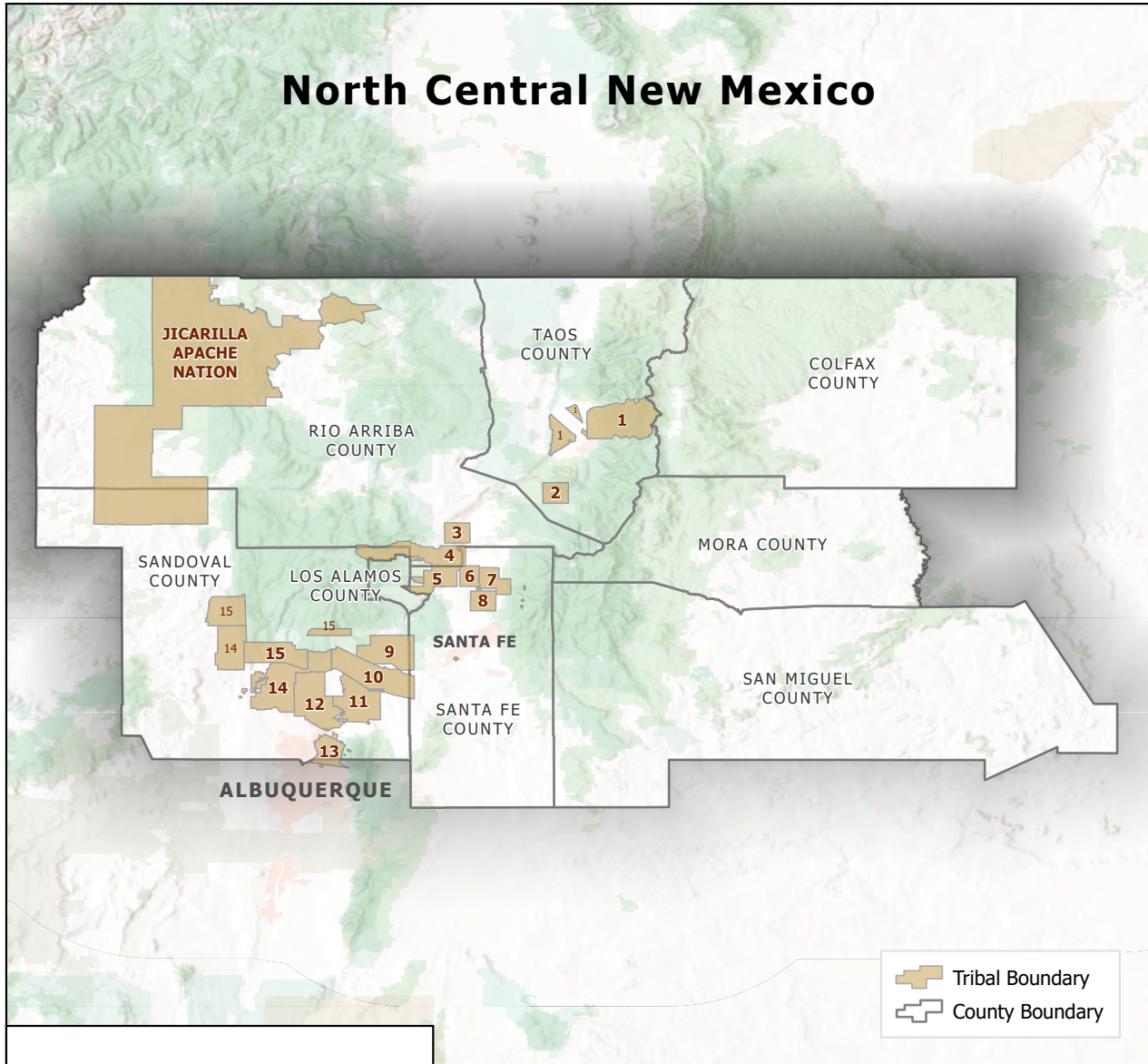
North Central
NEW MEXICO
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT



ANIMAL
PROTECTION
NEW MEXICO



North Central New Mexico



- | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 Taos Pueblo | 9 Pueblo de Cochiti |
| 2 Picuris Pueblo | 10 Santo Domingo Pueblo |
| 3 Ohkay Owingeh | 11 San Felipe Pueblo |
| 4 Santa Clara Pueblo | 12 Santa Ana Pueblo |
| 5 Pueblo de San Ildefonso | 13 Sandia Pueblo |
| 6 Pojoaque Pueblo | 14 Zia Pueblo |
| 7 Nambe Pueblo | 15 Jemez Pueblo |
| 8 Tesuque Pueblo | |

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 Data Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, NM RGIS
 Basemap: Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community, Esri, CGIAR, USGS

Dedication

*For New Mexico's animals and
the people who care for and about them*

Acknowledgments

Report Sponsor

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Human Production

This report was conceptualized, researched, compiled, written, fact-checked, visually documented, designed, and reviewed by human subject matter experts. AI assisted with consolidation and summary of certain materials.

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Report Producer

This report was produced by **Animal Protection New Mexico** (APNM), a statewide nonprofit dedicated to effecting systemic change resulting in the humane treatment of all animals. Founded in 1979, APNM creates policies, infrastructure, and services that protect animals and strengthen our communities. In conjunction with its legislative partner, **Animal Protection Voters**, founded in 2002, APNM changes entrenched systems that harm animals, demonstrating to the public and policymakers that societal wellness is directly linked to the well-being of animals.

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Letter of Introduction

It is a great honor to serve as a New Mexico state representative, and to be able to promote and support ideas and projects that will improve the lives of all New Mexicans.

My family knows what it is to serve others, and our legacy has always included seeking out ways to make sure larger systems work effectively to keep our communities safe, healthy, and in alignment with New Mexico's humane values.

New Mexicans understand that their communities thrive when everyone in them is safe from harm. Accordingly, this assessment report on animal services in the north central economic development district is crucial, as it provides comprehensive answers to questions about what animal-related systems and services are working in the region, which ones need to be improved, and which must be built from the ground up.

Deeply informed by local experts from across the region and with diverse backgrounds, this report provides a specific and detailed roadmap essential to enhancing and building the services and systems that New Mexicans want and expect, both in this region and throughout the state.

I look forward to helping move this report's recommendations forward through state policy, state funding, and collaborative and inclusive planning and implementation processes.

"¡Sí, se puede!"



**Representative
Tara L. Lujan**
District 48

Animal Protection New Mexico is enormously grateful to Representative Tara Lujan and the North Central New Mexico Economic Development District for underwriting this consequential report on animal-related services in its richly diverse region.

This report will serve as a crucial baseline and roadmap for community safety and economic wellness for the foreseeable future, not just in the north central region but for the entire state.

The report highlights not only significant gaps in basic services that are intricately tied to public safety and community wellness, but also enormous opportunities that are waiting to be implemented by leaders with vision and a passion for positive change.

New Mexico deserves to have robust, state-supported systems and infrastructure that ensure safe, humane, and healthy communities for everyone who calls the Land of Enchantment "home."

As discussed in the Introduction, regional planning being conducted by other entities ties seamlessly with many issues outlined in this assessment report. This reinforces the fact that overall community wellness requires strong systems and services related to animals and those who care about them.

Implementing the report's recommendations will help New Mexico thrive into the future by supporting economic development, youth engagement, cultural maintenance and revitalization, and sovereign capacity to address issues locally.



Elisabeth Jennings
Executive Director
Animal Protection
New Mexico



Tamaya Horse Rescue at Santa Ana Pueblo's Tamaya Resort rescues, rehabilitates, and trains horses for adoption, children's riding lessons, and family-friendly rodeos and demonstrations.

Executive Summary

Introduction

This Executive Summary synthesizes the findings and recommendations of *Animal Services in New Mexico: A Needs Assessment for the North Central Region*. It is the first report of its kind in New Mexico.

Commissioned by State Representative Tara L. Lujan and financed by GRO Funds administered by the North Central New Mexico Economic Development District, the report was prepared by Animal Protection New Mexico, a statewide animal advocacy nonprofit.

New Mexico faces interconnected challenges across animal sheltering, equine welfare, animal control, and animal-related emergency management. These systemic deficiencies affect public health and safety, state and local economic development, and quality of life. While these challenges are often addressed independently, this assessment found that they stem from common underlying issues.

Purpose

This report identifies regional challenges and offers recommendations to address root causes, promote funding and resource development, and elevate animal welfare statewide.

New Mexico policymakers and government officials are the primary intended audience. The report will also be important to stakeholders including animal shelter and equine rescue personnel, veterinary professionals, animal control and law enforcement agencies, legal and judicial professionals, emergency managers and responders, and animal advocates.

Geographic Scope

The north central region covers over 24,000 square miles and is home to 440,000 people, about 20 percent of New Mexico's total population. The region is largely rural, with nearly 140 villages and just two cities with populations over 50,000 (Rio Rancho and Santa Fe).

The study area encompasses eight counties (clockwise north to south): Rio Arriba, Taos, Colfax, Mora, San Miguel, Santa Fe, Los Alamos, and Sandoval.

Of the 23 federally recognized Tribes in New Mexico, 16 are located partially or completely within the study area. These are Jicarilla Apache Nation and 15 of the 19 Pueblos: Taos, Picuris, Ohkay Owingeh, Santa Clara, San Ildefonso, Pojoaque, Nambé, Tesuque, Cochiti, Santo Domingo (Kewa), San Felipe, Santa Ana, Sandia, Zia, and Jemez. Together, these 16 Tribes represent about 75 percent of New Mexico's Native population.

Animal Services Scope

The report examines four main pillars within the animal services sector: animal shelters, animal control programs, equine rescues, and animal-related disaster preparedness and response.

The report focuses on domestic animals. These include companion animals kept as pets, primarily dogs and cats, as well as loose dogs and community/feral cat colonies.

Equine welfare is also examined, including domestic horses, donkeys, and mules kept for companionship, recreation, and work; free-roaming horses; and wild horses.

"Backyard livestock" (household chickens, goats, sheep, etc.) and culturally significant species such as bison are also referenced.

Wildlife, commercial livestock, captive non-domesticated animals, and those used in the entertainment industry fall beyond the report's scope. However, wildlife rehabilitation is briefly covered in "Animal Emergency Management."

Methodology

To ensure a robust foundation, the project team used a mixed-methods research approach combining qualitative stakeholder feedback and quantitative data. Research was conducted between September 2024 and March 2026, utilizing the following inputs:

Interviews

In-depth stakeholder interviews were conducted with over 100 key personnel who live and work within the study area.

These included animal shelter and equine rescue directors, staff, board members, and volunteers; animal welfare organization representatives; veterinarians; animal control supervisors and officers; emergency managers and responders; and tribal government and community leaders. Over 25 interviews were also conducted with state, national, and tribal personnel with related expertise.¹

Tribal Engagement

A survey on animal services accessibility, community needs, and operational barriers was sent to all 23 federally recognized Tribes in the state, followed by a similar survey sent to Tribes within the study area, yielding a combined 75 percent response rate. Additionally, the project team met with the Eight Northern Indian Pueblos Council Board of Governors.

Key Findings

Data analysis revealed severe, overlapping service deficits across north central New Mexico. The main challenges facing each of the four animal services pillars are detailed below.

Animal Sheltering Findings

- **Dog and Cat Overpopulation:** Stakeholders cited “the sheer number of animals” as a foundational challenge, often resulting in overcrowding, disease, substandard care, capacity and staffing challenges, and euthanasia for space.
- **Sheltering and Veterinary Staffing:** Recruitment, retention, and compensation of personnel was a pain point for the area’s shelters. The critical veterinary shortage is especially seen in shelter medicine, rural areas, tribal communities, and equine and large-animal practices in New Mexico.
- **Facility Infrastructure:** Shelters in the study area (and across New Mexico) date from the 1970s to the 2020s. Older (and even newer) facilities face challenges in humanely caring for the large volume of animals and providing services communities now expect.
- **Animal Owner Issues:** Barriers to pet retention and lack of education on humane care and responsibility for animals are major challenges.

Site Visits and Events

Site visits, by request and invitation, included tours of the study area’s animal shelters, equine rescues, and Pueblos. Relevant events attended included conferences, pet adoption events, and equine clinics.²

State and National Data Sources

Other government, industry, and organizational sources informed the findings and recommendations. These included state agency reports, state/regional economic development and strategic plans, emergency operations plans, NMAC (New Mexico Administrative Code), and local animal ordinances; animal welfare organizations’ annual reports, data reports, and social media; and national professional animal welfare, government, and industry sources.

Animal Control Findings

- **Coverage Deserts:** Staffing levels are lean; some Tribes and one county lack any animal control program. Areas with animal control coverage face challenges recruiting, retaining, and training staff.
- **Dogs Running at Large:** The dangerous numbers of loose dogs, along with widespread, unchecked breeding, negatively impact shelter intake, public safety, and animal welfare.
- **Holding Facilities:** Response to service calls, large-scale cruelty cases, and disasters is weakened due to the limited number and capacity of places to temporarily hold animals.
- **Enforcement and Prosecution:** Repeat offenders, serious cruelty cases, and inconsistent prosecution are common in the region.

Equine Rescue Findings

- **Capacity:** The large number of at-risk equines exceeds the capacity of the state’s 14 licensed equine rescues to care for them.
- **Funding:** As feed and veterinary costs continue to rise, rescues face inadequate and unpredictable funding sources. Limited funding hinders equine workforce development at a time when many rescue staff are nearing retirement.

- **Standard of Care for Equines:** New Mexico lacks a state law outlining minimum standards of care to which owners are held, making equine cruelty and neglect difficult to charge and prosecute.
- **Free-Roaming Horse Management:** Reactive roundup and removal of herds exceeding range capacity is largely ineffective; proactive humane herd management that includes fertility control is needed instead.
- **Training:** Multiple stakeholders (emergency managers, responders, animal welfare organizations, veterinarians, volunteers, households with animals) need more training for greater resiliency as disasters increase in frequency and severity.
- **Investment in Animal Response:** There is no statewide coordinator or comprehensive funding mechanism for integrating domestic animals in emergency response.

Emergency Management Findings

- **Patchwork Response:** Disaster preparedness and response related to companion animals, equines, and household livestock is undeveloped in New Mexico. Animal response is often ad hoc, based on limited assets and personnel.
- **Resource Mapping:** The state lacks a centralized, state-vetted directory of animal response assets with request pathways. Noncommercial large-animal response is especially undeveloped.

Statewide Application of Findings

The study area's animal services needs reflect those common across New Mexico. While each region of the state has specific animal-related challenges, they also share many of the problems affecting the north central region, including large numbers of at-risk animals, workforce shortages, and funding limitations. For this reason, most of this report's recommendations apply to New Mexico as a whole.

Key Recommendations

Each of the report's four main sections offers its own specific recommendations. The recommendations below reflect the commonalities among them. They encompass actions to be taken, individually or in partnership, by state and local governments, tribal and non-tribal entities, the private sector, animal services, and New Mexico animal owners and caretakers.

Establish State-Level Oversight

Multiple agencies oversee animal issues, but the State lacks comprehensive authority and coordination. A New Mexico State Animal Protection Department would address gaps in animal welfare regulation and enforcement; serve as a central hub for oversight, policy, and enforcement; and strengthen cross-agency coordination and emergency response.

Invest in Animal Welfare

Chronic underinvestment in animal services is a major driver of all the findings. The domestic animal sector contributes millions of dollars to New Mexico's economy but receives less than one-tenth of one cent of every state dollar. Investment in population control (spay/neuter, equine fertility control), animal services

infrastructure, workforce development, pet retention support, and intake diversion is critically important.

Prioritize Prevention

Populations of dogs, cats, and equines must be reduced until they align with the sheltering system's capacity for care and the number of New Mexico households able to adopt and care for the animals. This will require steady, funded spay/neuter/gelding, targeting the most underserved communities and the breeds most represented in shelters and rescues.

Develop the Animal Services Workforce

While leaders prioritize workforce development in healthcare, education, and other sectors, animal services and veterinary medicine should also be included. Incentives should be developed to recruit and retain veterinary professionals.

Promote Humane, Lifelong Care

The majority of New Mexico households have pets and consider them family members. Many others keep equines or backyard livestock. Education on humane care, coupled with safety net services, will keep animals at home with their families and out of shelters.



Carson National Forest

Introduction

The First Report of Its Kind

Welcome to *Animal Services in New Mexico*. This report, based on 100+ interviews with boots-on-the-ground stakeholders, assesses four pillars of the animal welfare sector to identify service gaps and suggest improvements. Although focused on New Mexico's north central region, most of the findings and recommendations apply statewide. By implementing these solutions together, we can ensure that "humane" is a cornerstone of the Land of Enchantment.

"The welfare of animals and that of society overall are deeply connected."

—Anne Coller,
Board President,
Animal Protection
New Mexico

Photo by Heidi Baxter/APNM



Steven Archuleta and Dr. Clara Maxam check on Gray Cloud at a Taos Pueblo equine wellness clinic.

About The Region

New Mexico's north central region covers over 24,000 square miles, about the size of West Virginia, and is larger in area than nine U.S. states. More than 440,000 people, about one-fifth of the state's population, live within the region's varied and picturesque landscapes, from mountain forests to mesas and plains, with the Rio Grande wending its way down the central corridor.

The region encompasses eight counties and 16 sovereign tribal nations. Home to two cities with populations over 50,000 (Rio Rancho and Santa Fe), much of the region is rural, with almost 140 villages.³

It is a region of contrasts, from world-famous art centers to small-scale farms and outdoor recreation. The ancient and modern live side by side here: Taos Pueblo, one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in North America, is just an hour's drive to Los Alamos County, not incorporated until 1968. The north central region is also the site of momentous historical events, including the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, the most successful Native uprising against a colonizing power in North America, and the Manhattan Project, creating the world's first atomic bomb, in 1945.⁴

This region is one of the most culturally diverse areas not only of the state but of the entire country. "For all of us who call New Mexico home, the state's three predominant cultures—Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo—have always been intertwined," writes Santa Fe historian Ana Pacheco.⁵

Land Acknowledgment

Thousands of years before these cultural streams converged, indigenous peoples inhabited the region and stewarded its land, waters, flora, and fauna.

The study area encompasses land inhabited historically by the Ancestral Puebloans and now by their descendants. Today, the north central region is home to 15 of the 19 remaining Pueblos, out of more than 100 that existed prior to European contact in the 1500s. Pueblo presence in the region dates back 10,000 to 25,000 years.⁶

The 15 Pueblos include the members of the Eight Northern Indian Pueblos Council. These communities are linguistically and culturally diverse, with influences from neighboring tribes and the broader region. The

Right: A Jemez Pueblo Eagle dancer. Symbols, ceremonies, and traditional practices honoring animals and humans' relationships with them are central to Pueblo and most Native North American cultures.⁹

Pueblos in the north central region speak Tiwa, Tewa, Towa, and Keres languages, and maintain distinct traditions and practices.

The region also encompasses the Jicarilla Apache Nation. The Athabascans, the ancestors of today's Apache and Navajo peoples, migrated to the Southwest between 1400 and 1525. The Jicarilla Apache Nation, with its distinct history, language, and traditions, continues to play a vital role in the region's cultural landscape.

New Mexico's 23 federally recognized Tribes are sovereign nations. *Sovereignty* describes a legal status and the right to self-determination, but there is a strong spiritual component as well: "Sovereignty, in the words of our elders and spiritual leaders, is a right to our existence," explains Regis Pecos, co-founder of The Leadership Institute at the Santa Fe Indian School.⁷

Collectively, the region's sovereign tribes represent about 75 percent of the state's overall Native population.

Pueblo values have endured through centuries of external rule and cultural change. Their resilience is attributed to a strong connection to ancestral lands and a commitment to preserving language, culture, and traditions. Core values include appreciation, balance, community, compassion, faith, identity, love, respect, responsibility, reverence, service, resiliency, and perseverance. These values are reflected in Pueblo governance, culture, and educational initiatives.⁸

While this report focuses on the 15 Pueblos within the study area, the remaining four in New Mexico—Isleta, Acoma, Laguna, and Zuni—and Hopi Pueblo in Arizona share deep connections with their counterparts.

Efforts to improve animal welfare in New Mexico must actively involve Native voices and leadership. Many principles of the modern animal welfare movement align with traditional Pueblo values, providing a foundation for collaborative progress.



*“That sense of
humaneness,
guiding our
relations with
all things,
defines our
core values.”*

—Regis Pecos,
Co-Director, The
Leadership Institute
at the Santa Fe
Indian School, from
All Pueblo Council
of Governors Values
Statement

North Central New Mexico By The Numbers

Area & Jurisdictions	Population	Education	Economic Drivers
24,200 sq. mi. Total Area	444,316 Total Pop. (21% of NM Pop.)	23.8% High School Grad	Professional, Sci. & Tech.
22/sq. mi. Pop. Density	56.7% White	22% Some College	Health Care
8 Counties	47.7% Hispanic/Latino	19.3% Bachelor’s Degree	Public Administration
15 Pueblos	20.5% 2 or More Races	17.6% Advanced Degree	Education
1 Tribal Nation	7.5% American Indian or Alaska Native	8.8% Associates Degree	Tourism
5 Cities	1.4% Asian American	8.5% No High School Diploma	Construction
6 Towns	1.4% Black or African American		Finance & Insurance
130+ Villages	.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander		

Sources: UNM Earth Data Analysis Center, NCNMEDD 2026–2030 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

Animals and New Mexico

The geological record shows that millions of years before humans walked this land, animals inhabited what is now New Mexico. About 300 million years ago, the region was covered by an ancient sea. During the Late Triassic to Late Cretaceous periods (230 to 66 million years ago), *Tyrannosaurus rex*, *Triceratops*, and other iconic dinosaur species roamed the area. Humans appeared around 25,000 years ago.

Indigenous peoples of the Southwest hunted rabbits, mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, and desert bighorn sheep. More than 2,000 years ago, Ancestral Puebloans domesticated wild turkeys.¹⁰ Indigenous peoples also lived with dogs and used them as pack animals. As the Native American Humane Society notes, "As Native Americans, we have shared special relationships with dogs for millennia, celebrating them in our stories, songs, and traditions. We believe that people and animals deserve to live together in health and safety."¹¹

From 1493 onward, European colonizers imported horses, cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, and chickens to the Americas. (Horses' significant role in New Mexico history and culture is discussed in "Equine Rescues," page 92.) For hundreds of years, colonial settlers' survival depended on animals for food, fiber, transportation, and labor. To this day, many northern

New Mexico families keep farm animals, often called "backyard livestock," for household, non-commercial purposes. These animals are an important part of their cultural heritage. Working animals, such as herding dogs and ranch horses, are also common in the region.

Free-roaming dogs and cats live in rural, suburban, urban, and tribal communities across New Mexico. Community cat colonies often have a human caretaker who provides food and access to sterilization and veterinary care (see case study on page 50). Dogs running at large is a widespread issue.

As is true across the U.S., the majority of New Mexicans, about 65 percent, have companion animals. The most popular pets are dogs and cats, but "pocket pets," such as hamsters and lizards, are also common.

Although most owners see their companion animals as members of the family, under New Mexico state law animals are considered property, as in most other U.S. states.¹²

The Animal Legal Defense Fund (ALDF), a national organization, surveys animal protection laws in all U.S. states and territories. For the 20 years ALDF has published its annual report, New Mexico has fallen in the bottom tier. In 2025 New Mexico ranked #42 for its animal protection laws, up from #50 in 2020.¹³ Neighboring states—Arizona, Colorado, and Texas—all rank in the top tier.





Americans' relationship with domestic animals has undergone a sea change over the past 30 years. Today, nearly 70% of U.S. households keep pets, and 97% consider them part of the family.¹⁸

Left: A young, healthy dog at Española Humane awaits a new home.

Facing page: 1880s street scene in Los Cerrillos. New Mexico was built on the backs of horses, donkeys, and mules.

About This Report

This section describes the report's purpose, scope, and other features, as well as its statewide application.

Purpose

This report identifies challenges in the north central region's animal services sector and offers recommendations to address root causes, promote funding and resource development, and elevate animal welfare statewide. Doing so will also enhance community well-being. This report shows how human and animal wellness are inextricably linked. Benefits to one lift the other; neglect of one harms the other.

Scope

The report examines four main animal services fields: animal shelters, animal control programs, equine rescues, and animal emergency management. Each main section begins with a historical and present overview of that field, followed by findings. Case studies showcase examples of effective, humane practices within the study area, in other regions of New Mexico, and outside the state. General best practices for each field are also discussed. Each main section concludes with recommendations based on the findings and best practices described.

The report focuses primarily on domestic animals. Wildlife, commercial livestock, captive animals in

zoos and research facilities, and animals used in the entertainment industry fall beyond the scope of this report. However, wildlife rehabilitation is briefly discussed in "Animal Emergency Management."

The final section, "Putting It All Together," describes overall best practices in animal services and offers overall recommendations to improve animal welfare and the animal services sector in New Mexico. The report concludes with an extensive list of Resources.

Terminology

"Domestic animals" include animals kept as pets, such as dogs and cats. Although "companion animal" is considered a more accurate and respectful term than "pet," this report uses the terms interchangeably because the animal services industry typically uses the shorter and more familiar word "pets." The report also looks at free-roaming dogs and community cats; both categories may or may not have human owners or guardians. "Owner" is used in this report to reflect the vocabulary used in animal services, New Mexico statutes, and local animal ordinances.

The report also examines the welfare of equines (horses, donkeys, and mules) in New Mexico, including domestic equines (those kept for companionship, recreation, and work); free-roaming horses, and wild horses. "Backyard livestock" and culturally significant species such as bison are also referenced.

Methodology

The project team identified and gathered input from over 100 stakeholders in New Mexico via surveys, interviews, and site visits. These included key animal shelter and animal control staff, equine rescue leaders, emergency managers, veterinarians, and tribal officials. Further inputs came from interviews with national animal welfare experts and research from government and industry sources. Subject matter experts assisted in analyzing the data and developing recommendations. Stakeholders and experts reviewed relevant sections of the report prior to publication.

Audiences

The report's primary intended audience is New Mexico legislators and other elected officials and policymakers, both tribal and non-tribal. Other stakeholders who will find the report relevant include New Mexico's animal sheltering community, animal control and law enforcement agencies, equine rescues and equine managers, veterinary community, emergency managers and public safety officers, humane educators, and animal advocates.

Foundational Principles

In addition to the all-important Link (see sidebar, page 21), the principles described below provide the conceptual framework and ethical rationale for this report's needs analysis and recommendations.

Human-Animal Bond

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) defines the human-animal bond as "a mutually beneficial relationship between people and animals. It is influenced by behaviors essential to the mental, physical, and social health and wellbeing of both."¹⁴

In everyday examples, the human-animal bond is the reason why a suicidal serviceman showed up at a local Veterans Administration office seeking help; to protect his dog, he had decided not to take his own life. The bond is the reason an individual may choose to live in their car rather than surrender a pit bull not allowed by a landlord, or to stay in an abusive home rather than leave their cat behind, or to risk death during a disaster rather than abandon their non-human family members. For many people, the human-animal bond is sacred and unbreakable.

One Health

One Health recognizes the interconnections between humans, animals, and the environment to improve health outcomes. The concept is ancient among the world's indigenous peoples, and over the past 20 years it has developed as an evidence-based, transdisciplinary field. According to the Centers for Disease Control, One Health "encourages the collaborative efforts of many experts ... to improve the health of people and animals, including pets, livestock, and wildlife."¹⁵

One Health also recognizes that interacting or living with companion animals provides many benefits for people. These include an increase in positive brain chemicals, such as dopamine and oxytocin; improved heart health; mental health benefits; stress reduction and emotional well-being benefits for children; healthy aging and even living longer; and assistance in the treatment of a wide variety of conditions, including depression, post-traumatic stress, Alzheimer's disease, and autism spectrum disorder. A national survey of 1,000 family doctors found that 97 percent believe there are health benefits to owning a pet, and 75 percent saw their patients' health improve after getting a companion animal.¹⁶

Whole Community

Whole Community is an emergency management approach that emphasizes collaboration among all stakeholders to enhance community resilience and response during emergencies.¹⁷

This approach seeks to engage local governments, businesses, and organizations in planning and response efforts; to foster partnerships with community members to identify unique needs and resources; to promote inclusive communication strategies to ensure all voices are heard; to encourage volunteerism and local training programs for emergency preparedness; to utilize local knowledge and resources to improve response effectiveness; and to continuously evaluate and adapt plans based on community feedback and experiences.

Whole Community has three core principles: understanding and meeting the actual needs of the whole community; engaging and empowering all parts of the community; and strengthening what works well in communities on a daily basis.

The Link

For years, animal mistreatment was viewed as a separate or private concern, but extensive research now shows a strong connection—known as *The Link*—between animal abuse and interpersonal violence and other crimes against humans.¹⁹ Because animals are vulnerable, unable to report harm, and usually treated legally as property, abuse toward them can be overlooked, especially in households where domestic violence, child maltreatment, or elder abuse is occurring. Recognizing animal cruelty as both a warning sign and a co-occurring form of violence strengthens early intervention and prevention efforts.

History of The Link

In the 1970s, the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit investigated patterns in violent crime. Special Agent Allen Brantley found that 78 percent of serial killers had a history of animal abuse, with many beginning the behavior in childhood or adolescence. This research highlighted animal cruelty as a developmental risk indicator for future interpersonal violence.

In 2014, responding to recommendations from Link experts, the FBI added four categories of animal cruelty—simple and gross neglect, physical abuse, organized abuse, and sexual abuse—to the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS). For the first time, the country had a mechanism to track and quantify the frequency of animal cruelty and its overlap with other criminal activity.

A Multidisciplinary Issue

Awareness of The Link now spans many fields: animal care and control, domestic violence advocacy, child and adult protective services, veterinary and medical professions, behavioral health, law enforcement, prosecution, courts, social work, research, and government.

Each system often sees only one aspect of a troubled household. Coordinating information and referrals across these sectors strengthens safety for both people and animals by identifying patterns of risk earlier and more accurately.

Beyond High Profile Cases

While extreme examples, such as mass violence or serial offenders, draw public attention, The Link is equally relevant in everyday cases of domestic violence, family instability, chronic neglect, and other ongoing harm. Animal abuse can function as a tool of coercive control, a sign of household vulnerability, or a signal that other victims may be at risk. Understanding The Link is therefore a practical approach to prevention and early intervention, not solely an academic or high profile concern.

Data and Reporting Challenges

A major barrier to understanding national and state animal cruelty trends is inconsistent reporting. In many areas, animal control is not part of law enforcement and cannot directly enter incidents into NIBRS, leading to undercounting. Establishing clear referral protocols for reporting, case numbering, and investigative collaboration improves data accuracy, resource allocation, and accountability for repeat offenders.

Education and Cross-Reporting

Improving outcomes requires shared workflows and consistent communication across agencies. Education helps professionals and the public recognize The Link, while cross-reporting systems ensure that when one agency identifies potential harm, others with the authority to act are alerted. Coordinated responses protect vulnerable people and animals, and reduce the likelihood of repeated or escalating violence.



“When animals are at risk, people are at risk. When people are at risk, animals are at risk.”

—Phil Arkow,
Executive Director,
National Link
Coalition

Statewide Animal Welfare Challenges by Sector

 ANIMAL SHELTERING	 ANIMAL CONTROL	 VETERINARY SERVICES	 EQUINE WELFARE	 TRIBAL ANIMAL SERVICES	 ANIMAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
Top Challenge: Shelter Capacity Crisis	Top Challenge: Fragmented, Undervalued Systems	Top Challenge: Critical Workforce Shortage	Top Challenge: Insufficient Funding and Infrastructure	Top Challenge: Limited Access to Resources and Services	Top Challenge: Lack of Coordinated Response
1. High intake rates—nearly triple the national average—overwhelm shelters and exceed available capacity.	1. Many communities lack adequate animal control ordinances and officers, creating public safety and animal welfare gaps.	1. Veterinarian and veterinary technician shortages limit access to rural, shelter, equine, and mixed-animal care.	1. Unstable, unreliable funding hinders equine rescue operations' ability to meet rising care and operational costs.	1. Limited shelter access and regional partnerships leave many Tribal communities without reliable animal sheltering options.	1. Undeveloped local partnerships and formal agreements weaken coordinated animal disaster response.
2. Understaffing, compassion fatigue, and high turnover strain shelter systems.	2. Understaffing, low compensation, and job stress limit effective animal control operations.	2. NM's largely rural character limits veterinary care access in 30 of 33 counties.	2. Insufficient staff, volunteers, and succession planning threaten equine rescue network sustainability.	2. Sparse or no animal control programs limit Tribal response to animal welfare/public safety concerns.	2. The lack of a statewide animal EM asset directory with request pathways slows disaster response and recovery.
3. Outdated, substandard facility infrastructure and inadequate funding restrict ability to meet community needs.	3. Inconsistent training reduces officer safety and service quality.	3. An aging and retiring vet workforce and limited recruitment pipelines threaten future capacity.	3. Limited equine veterinary services create care gaps, particularly in rural and Tribal areas.	3. Limited access to veterinary services and prevention programs increases barriers to animal health and management.	3. Insufficient training of multiple categories of EM stakeholders weakens preparedness and response.
4. Limited capacity contributes to high rates of euthanasia (21%) and out-of-state transport (17%).	4. Weak, inconsistent enforcement and prosecution allow repeat violations and reduce accountability.	4. Limited in-state training opportunities drive future veterinary professionals to out-of-state education and opportunities.	4. The lack of a humane statewide free-roaming horse management program adds to welfare and natural resource challenges.	4. Animal dumping by outside individuals on Tribal lands burdens already resource-strapped communities.	4. Insufficient funding limits state and local capacity to plan, coordinate, and contract with nonprofits for animal disaster response.
5. Five NM counties are considered no-service areas due to lack of animal shelters.	5. Dogs running at large continue to drive preventable bites, livestock predation, and traffic collisions.	5. Underrepresentation of Pueblos and Tribes amplifies vet access challenges.	5. No government-run or -contracted equine rescues exist in NM; all are private/non-profit organizations.	5. Many Tribal Emergency Operations Plans do not include plans for animals.	5. Inadequate public education on animal-owner responsibilities undermines disaster preparedness.

Statewide Systemic Animal Welfare Challenges

 Crisis Numbers of At-Risk Dogs, Cats, and Equines	 Weak and Missing Capacity, Infrastructure, and Authority	 Workforce Shortages in Animal Care & Control, Equine, and Veterinary	 Coordination Gaps Across Agencies and Communities	 Insufficient and Unreliable Funding
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Statewide Application of Findings

Although this needs assessment focuses specifically on animal services in north central New Mexico, its findings have broader statewide relevance. The available quantitative and anecdotal/experiential/qualitative data indicate that every region of New Mexico faces similar challenges related to animal-related infrastructure, programs, and services, along with associated gaps.

While some regions have unique challenges beyond those identified in the north central region, this report provides a valuable framework for understanding and addressing common statewide needs. Many animal-related infrastructure and service challenges extend beyond a single region.

Together, the regional in-depth findings in this report and statewide data (see tables at left) underscore the compelling need for a coordinated state approach to animal services. **In fact, without a coordinated state approach, many of this report's recommendations cannot be implemented.**

A Key Statewide Need: A State Animal Protection Agency

Currently, there are enormous gaps in oversight and management of animal welfare and protection issues at the state level. The few state agencies with some animal-related authority or responsibility are:

- Limited in scope, leaving most animal issues unaddressed;
- Scattered and siloed across state government;
- Carrying out duties outside the agency's primary purpose.

A dedicated New Mexico Department of Animal Protection is a long-overdue addition to state government. It would:

- Consolidate existing programs and funds serving animals under one roof;
- Establish authority over unaddressed issues that do not fit within any other existing agency; and
- Provide a central hub for ongoing assessment, policy development, coordination, and support to address animal-related infrastructure and services across the state.



New Mexico animal advocates gather at the Roundhouse for Animal Protection Lobby Day.

Critical components of this Department may include administration of funds and grants to support animal services; animal cruelty investigation and prosecution assistance; cross-agency liaison work; improved regulation of shelters, sanctuaries, businesses, and other entities that keep or care for animals; and operation of a free-roaming horse management program.

When strong, affordable systems and services are not available to help people care for their animals, the consequences don't disappear—they shift. They shift to law enforcement responding to animal cruelty and neglect cases, to overcrowded shelters managing preventable intake, to local governments absorbing response costs, and ultimately to taxpayers.

Conversely, accessible and effective animal services infrastructure strengthens communities, improves public safety, reduces public costs, and promotes better outcomes for people and animals.

This systems-based approach reflects a growing national trend. As the editors of *Animal Care and Control Today*, published by the National Animal Care & Control Association, explain: "[S]tates are not only updating laws—they are rethinking systems.... This shift reflects a growing understanding that sustainable animal welfare outcomes require clear policy, strong partnerships, and a foundation of trust between agencies and the communities they serve."²⁰

Why Invest in Animal Welfare?

Companion animals enrich not only people's emotional and physical well-being but also our national, state, and local economies. The pet sector contributes \$260.5 billion to the United States economy and supports 2.78 million jobs, according to the American Pet Products Association (APPA).

Here in New Mexico, there are nearly 12,000 pet-related jobs, accounting for \$437 million in earnings and \$84 million in tax revenue, according to APPA estimates.²¹ And that's not counting the domestic equine sector.

Yet despite these considerable economic benefits, the amount of New Mexico's \$11 billion state budget allocated to animal services is about one-tenth of one cent of every dollar.²²

Historical Progress

As the timeline below shows (see pages 24–29), since the colonial era American society has steadily moved toward greater compassion for animals, better care standards, and deeper understanding of the connections between human and animal well-being. Treatment of animals once considered normal—such as clubbing or drowning stray dogs and cats to curb

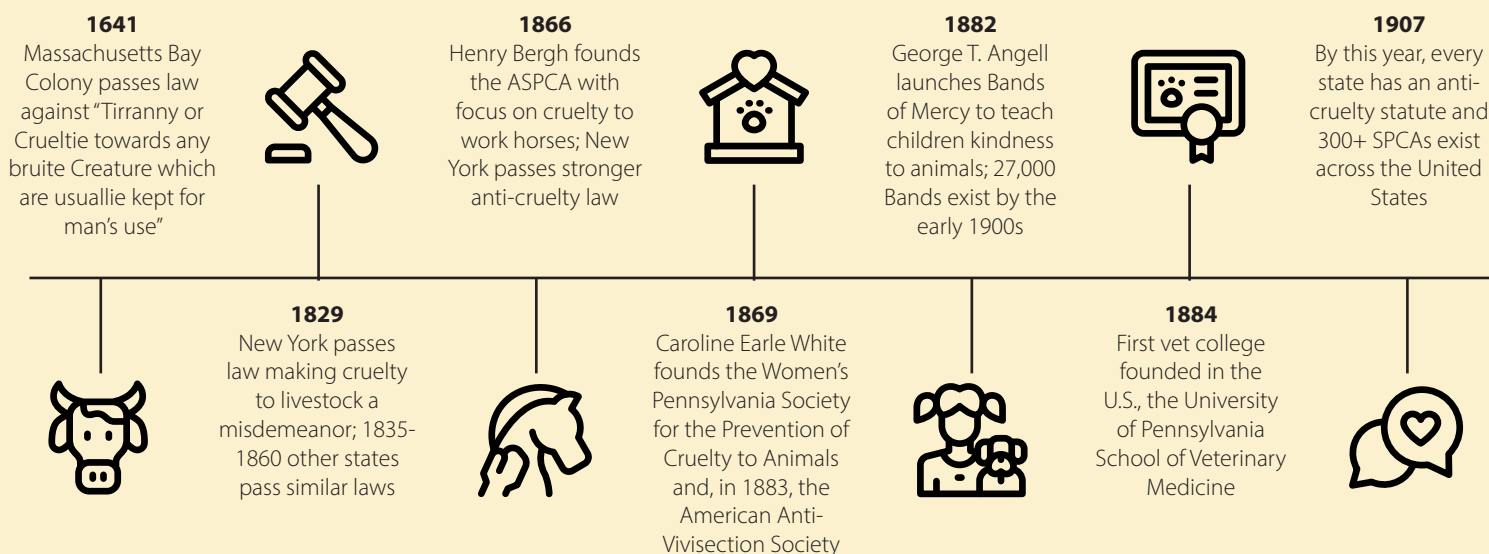
populations, or driving carriage horses to the point of collapse—is no longer socially acceptable. In fact, a Research & Polling study sponsored by Animal Protection Voters found that 93 percent of New Mexicans surveyed believe animal cruelty is wrong. Further, 90 percent believe it should be punishable by law.²³ Over two-thirds (68 percent) indicated they would be more likely to vote for a legislator or elected official if they supported stronger animal cruelty laws.

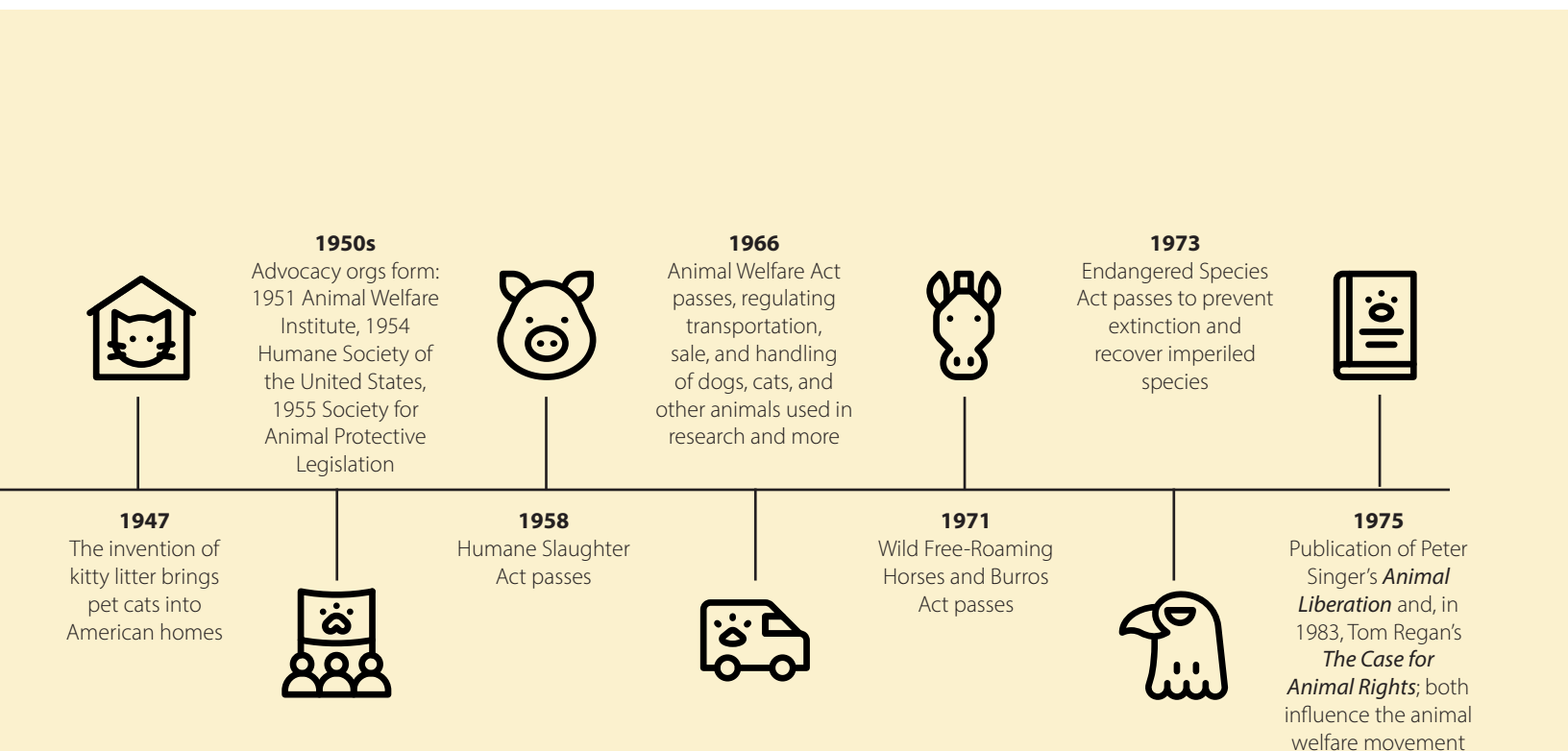
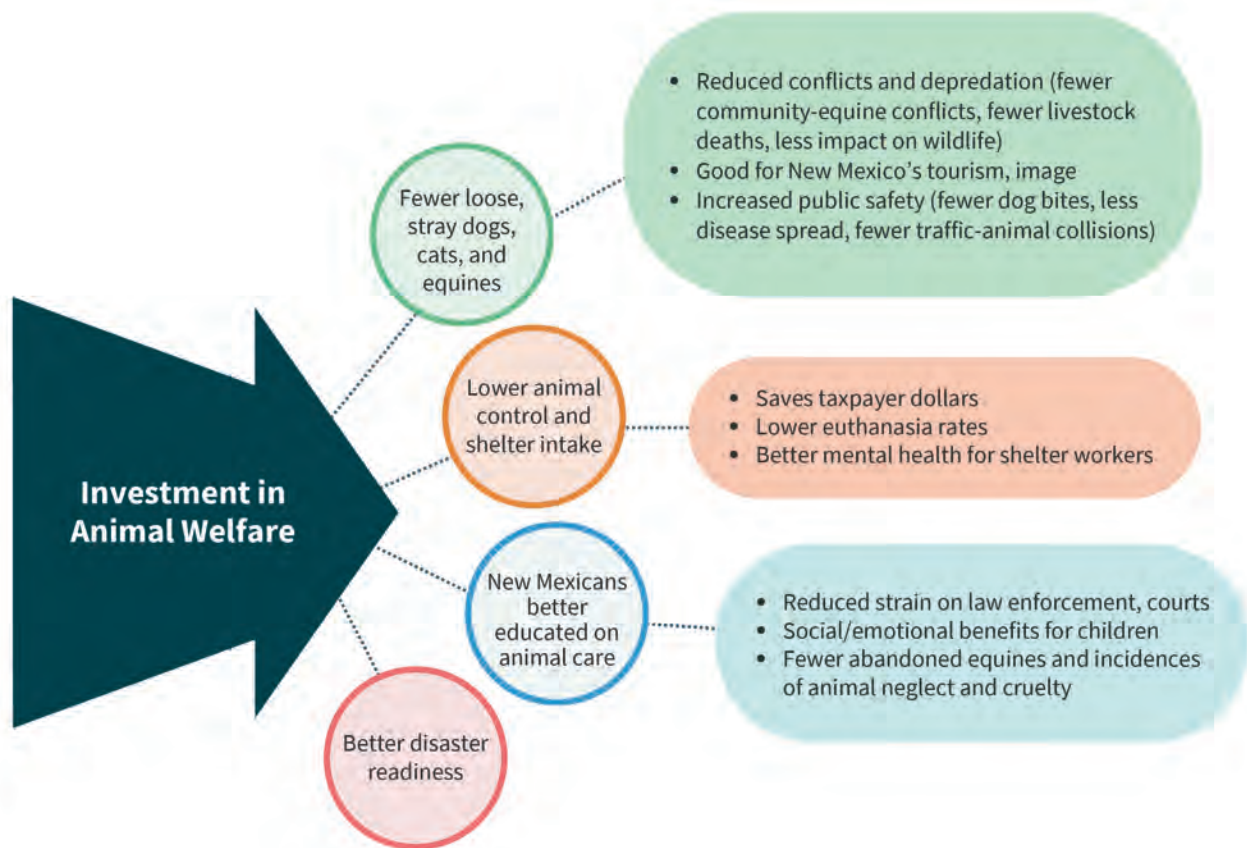
The takeaway? **Concern for animals is common ground for New Mexicans with differing—and even opposing—views on other matters.**

Society today is undergoing a profound transformation of values, practices, and policies around animals. This historic moment represents a unique opportunity for New Mexico leaders to be on the side of progress toward greater compassion and inclusion of animals. Along with demonstrating sound ethics, implementing humane, effective animal services makes sense. It saves public dollars, creates jobs, makes communities safer, and cultivates good citizenship.

Fortunately, improving animal services complements policies and initiatives New Mexico leaders are already working on. A few key ones are described next.

Milestones in U.S. Animal Welfare





Animal Welfare Aligns with Current Policy Priorities

Improving animal welfare in New Mexico does not require reinventing the wheel. Instead, it asks to integrate animal issues into existing plans and strategies. Essentially, it really is that simple.

Several policy goals already identified by the highest New Mexico leaders, both statewide and regional, easily relate to animal issues. Let's explore five of them.

First, the New Mexico Economic Development Department (NMEDD) has designated target industries for growth to help develop a sustainable, diverse state economy. One industry targeted is outdoor recreation, fitting for a state whose nickname is the Land of Enchantment.

The 2019 creation of the EDD's New Mexico Outdoor Recreation Division signaled the state's recognition of the outdoor recreation economy as "an immensely powerful engine to grow wealth and job opportunities in our state."²⁴ In 2022 the outdoor economy contributed \$2.4 billion to the state, 21 percent of the state tourism industry's total contribution.²⁵

Conservation of flora and fauna is a pillar of the Division's work. Healthy wildlife, equines, and

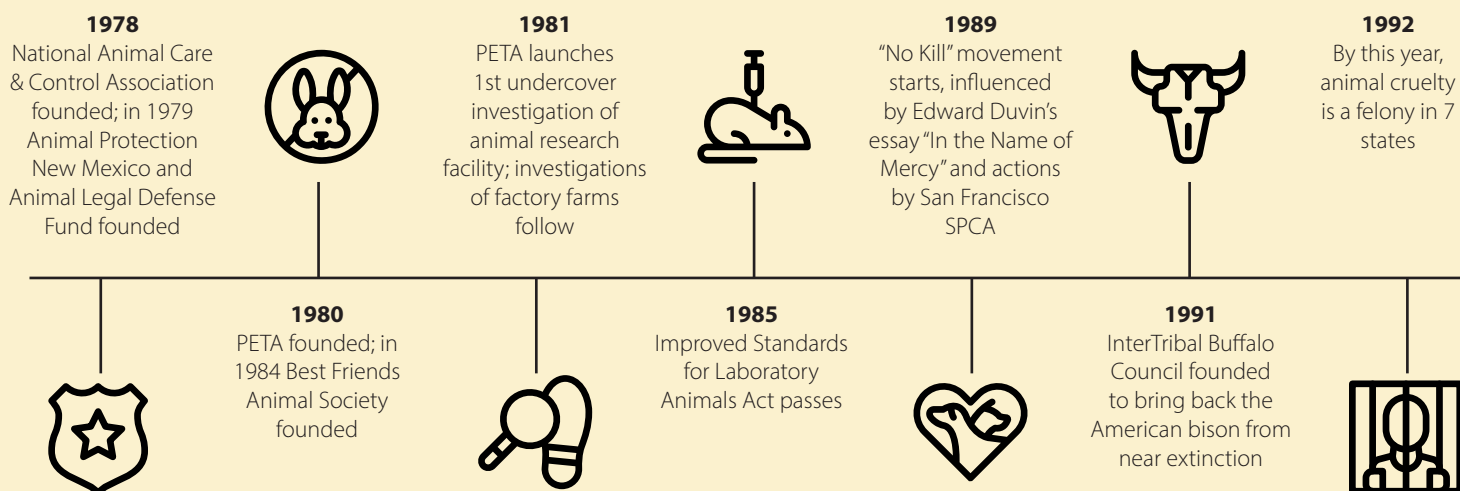
domestic animals will attract visitors and enrich local communities alike. In contrast, signs of substandard animal care and management—such as New Mexico's numerous stray dogs and suffering equines, to name two painfully visible issues—detract from the state's appeal to visitors and residents alike.

Next, economic strategy by New Mexico region is also relevant to animal services. In January of 2026, the North Central New Mexico Economic Development District (NCNMEDD) published its *2026-2030 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)*.²⁶

The *CEDS* report vision states: "North Central New Mexico is a region of vibrant, culturally grounded communities that will be strengthened by resilient infrastructure, collaborative governance, and economic innovation—where high-quality housing, diverse economies, shared prosperity, and public infrastructure investment create opportunity for all residents."

By emphasizing "all residents," this vision embraces inclusion of all households in the region, the majority of which keep animals. Investments and services related to those animals serve the region's residents and help fulfill NCNMEDD's vision.

Milestones in U.S. Animal Welfare



Housing

The first pillar of the *CEDS* report identifies housing availability and affordability as one of the region's most consistent challenges. Taos has the highest share of cost-burdened households (35 percent), followed by Santa Fe (34 percent).

In the north central region and statewide, housing is also one of the top reasons owners relinquish their animals to shelters.²⁷ Common housing-related challenges include: scarcity of affordable housing, pets prohibited by landlords, breed and size restrictions, and cost of pet deposits, rent, or fees.

Adopting pet-inclusive rental policies and developing affordable, animal-friendly housing options will help realize NCNMEDD's objective that the region has a "good supply of quality, affordable homes."

Economic and Workforce Development

Another *CEDS* pillar is "Economic Mobility, Workforce Development, and Quality of Life." The report spotlights this pillar in strong language: "The region MUST continue building out its industries to grow and diversify the region's economic base" to counteract rural depopulation, underutilized infrastructure, and economic stagnation.

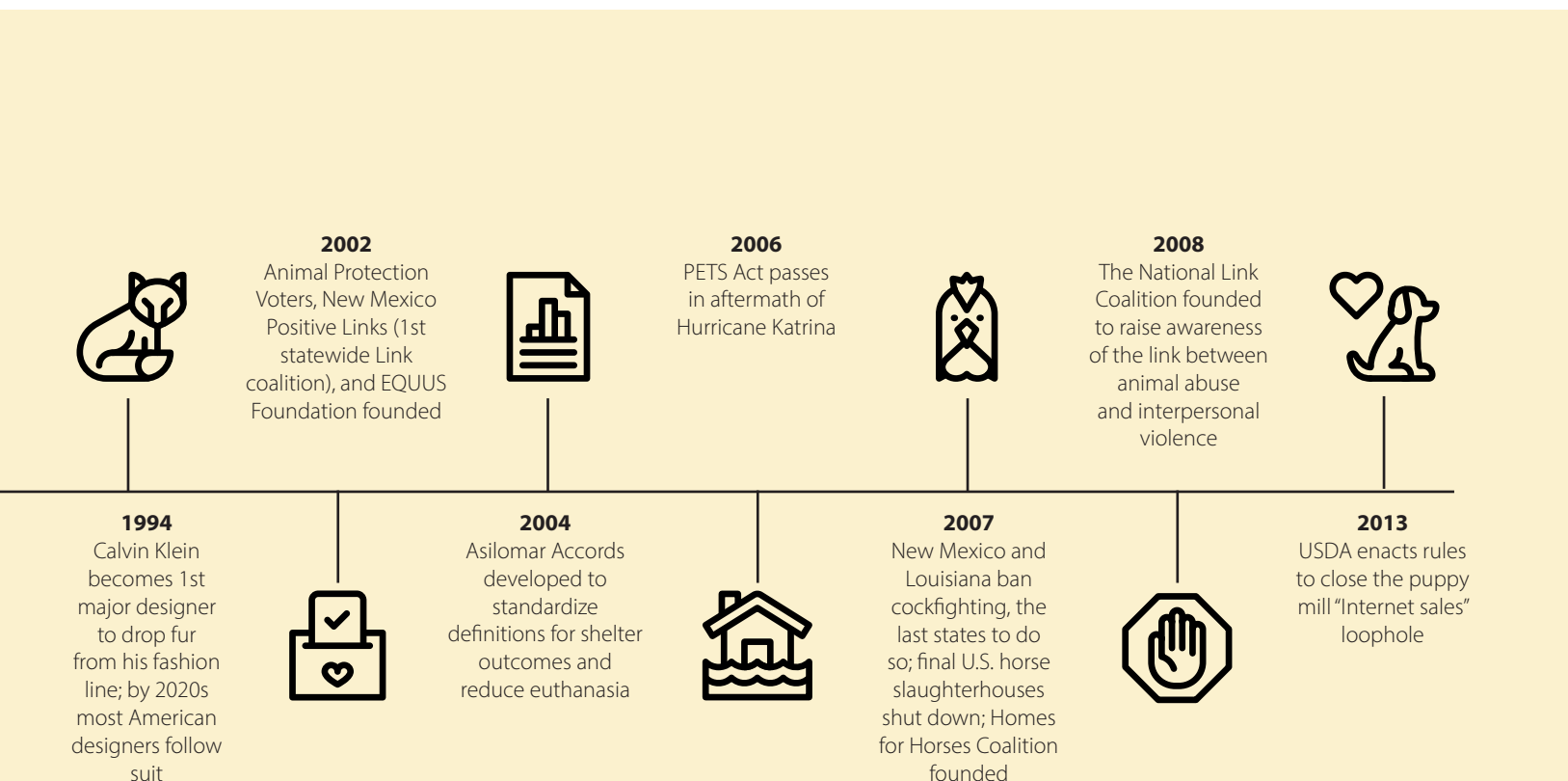
This pillar directly intersects with the region's animal services needs. Stakeholders in all four sectors interviewed—animal shelters, animal control, equine rescue, and animal emergency management—identified staffing and employment issues as the top challenge or one of the main challenges they face. Workforce development in animal services, veterinary medicine, the equine industry, and animal-related emergency management will help fulfill larger regional and statewide objectives.

The *CEDS* report especially recommends small business development in the region. Animal-related counterparts could include pet boutiques, trail-riding stables, animal-assisted therapy providers, pet-friendly restaurants and hotels, and similar enterprises.

Emergency Preparedness and Response

The final *CEDS* pillar that directly connects with animal services needs is "Government Efficiency, Capacity, and Collaboration." This especially relates to integrating animals in disaster preparedness and response.

Since the federal Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act (PETS Act) was signed into law in 2006, states receiving FEMA assistance are required to



include companion animals in their evacuation and sheltering plans. Beyond legal compliance, failure to include animals in disaster planning leads to avoidable mishaps such as response delays, logistics and transport challenges, and, worst, loss of life as some residents refuse to evacuate without their animals.

The field of animal emergency management is young and still evolving. Many states, including New Mexico, have underdeveloped animal-integrated emergency plans and infrastructure. Nevertheless, given the increasing frequency and intensity of climate change disasters (wildfires, floods, drought, etc.), New Mexico emergency managers urge communities to prioritize preparedness: “Start small—but start,” they advise. The better emergency plans integrate companion animals, equines, and backyard livestock, the safer New Mexico communities will be.

Public Health and Safety

Public health and public safety are cornerstones not only of state and regional strategic plans but also of current New Mexico gubernatorial candidates’ campaign platforms.²⁸ The interconnections between animal services and the core public safety function of state, local, and tribal governments are undeniable.



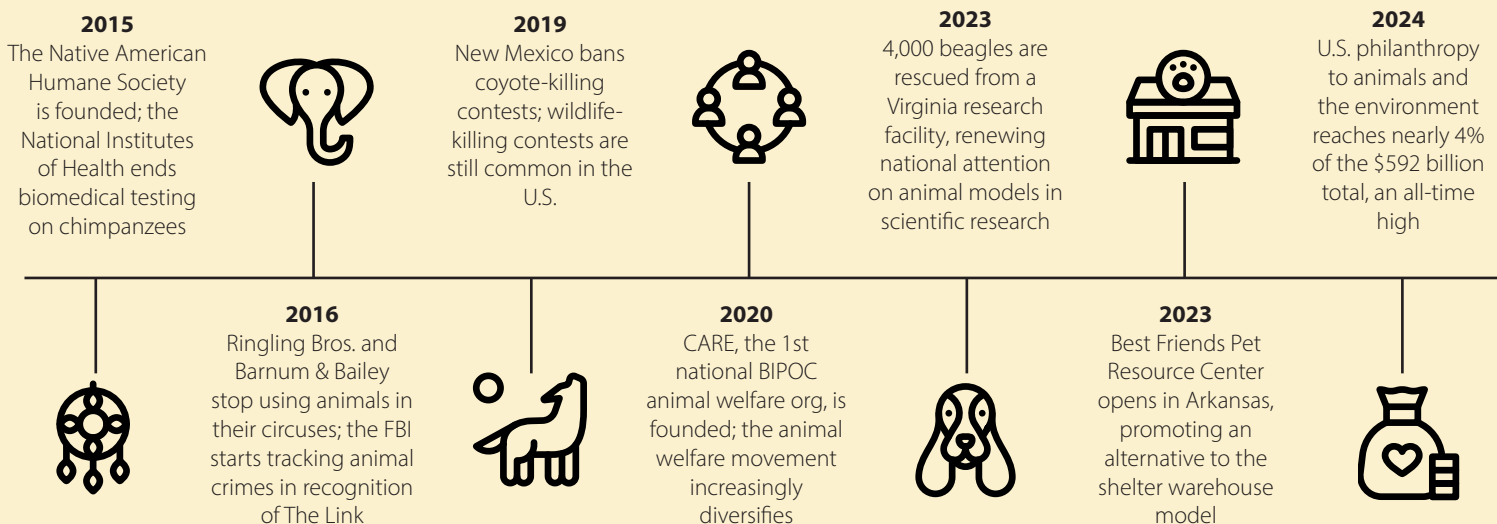
Photo courtesy Española Humane

During the April 2026 Riverside Fire in the Española Bosque, Española Humane animal shelter packed crates and readied vans in case animal evacuation became necessary.

As described in “The Link” (page 21), there is a well-documented connection between animal abuse and interpersonal violence. Instituting cross-reporting and coordination between animal and human services personnel will help keep New Mexico communities safer.

This report covers several animal-related impacts on public health and safety. Two common and visible ones are dogs running at large, increasing public risk

Milestones in U.S. Animal Welfare





NMDOG's Roadie the "Bark Ranger" (far right) visits New Mexico classrooms to teach students about humane care for animals and the dangers of dog chaining.

for bites, attacks, livestock predation, and exposure to zoonotic diseases; and free-roaming equines, increasing risk for property damage, traffic collisions, and negative ecosystem impacts.

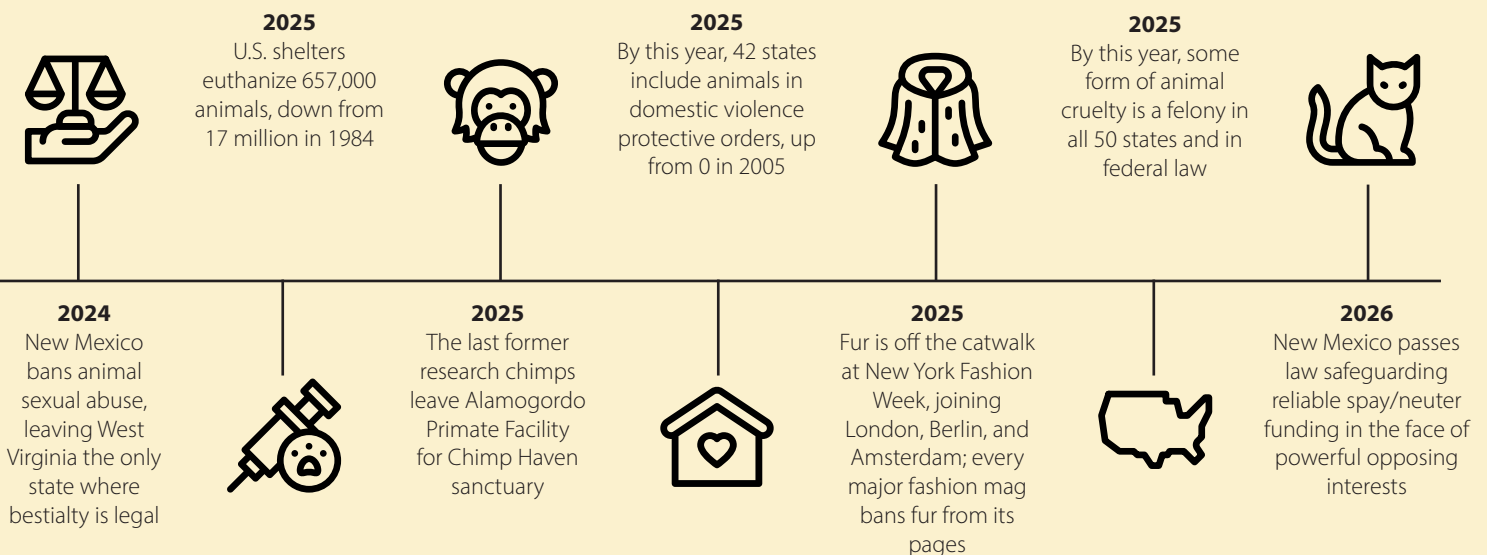
Another important, less visible impact on public health and safety is the compassion fatigue so many animal welfare professionals experience due to chronic exposure to animal suffering, euthanasia, animal-owner distress, and other job-related trauma.

Education

Another cornerstone of New Mexico policymaker platforms is education. To fulfill any of the strategic objectives and policies outlined in state and regional visions, education of New Mexico residents is necessary.

The same is true for improvements in animal welfare and their impacts on overall community well-being. Every stakeholder interviewed for this report cited the need for statewide education on care and responsibility for animals. Stakeholders recommend prioritizing humane education for K-12 students, as the next generation will soon lead our communities. However, engaging adults—parents, business and community leaders, and state, local, and tribal officials—was also seen as important and necessary.

Lasting, systemic change requires rethinking how we care for and protect the animals with whom we share our homes and our state. Humane education fosters empathy, responsibility, and compassionate action through nurturing kindness towards animals, the natural world, and each other. The qualities that make us good stewards of animals also make us proud, productive residents of the great state of New Mexico.





A dog housed at Raton Humane Society, the only animal shelter in Colfax County. Founded in 1979, the shelter has had a small staff of City employees led by the volunteer founder/director for 47 years.

Animal Shelters

Introduction

Modern sheltering grew out of the colonial impoundment system created to contain roaming livestock, exterminate unwanted animals, and, later, control rabies. Although shelters today seek not to kill animals but to find homes for them, the profession's past continues to influence and constrain it. Nationwide and in New Mexico, the animal care and control sector is undergoing a systemic overhaul to better serve animals and communities.

“An animal shelter is a reflection of the community that supports it.”

—**Stacie Voss**, Chair,
Animal Sheltering
Committee,
New Mexico Board of
Veterinary Medicine

Photos by Heidi Baxter/APNM



A litter of kittens awaiting adoption at Española Humane. One unspayed female and her offspring can produce over 11,000 cats in 5 years.

History of Animal Sheltering

Animal shelters in America evolved from the livestock impounds that were found in colonial towns and villages. The pounds were used to round up and hold wandering livestock that could be redeemed from the pound master for a fee. Because an economic value was placed on these animals, they were often reclaimed. When the system expanded to hold loose dogs and cats, these animals were usually killed because little monetary value was placed on them.

The first animal welfare organization in the U.S. was the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), founded in 1866 by Henry Bergh. The ASPCA focused on the mistreatment of horses and working animals, not dogs and cats. Several other humane organizations were founded soon after in major cities, but they were not, and still are not, affiliated with each other.

Women have played a central role in the U.S. animal welfare movement and specifically in humane sheltering. In 1874, the Women's Branch of the Pennsylvania SPCA in Philadelphia, founded by Caroline Earle White, became the first organization to focus on the humane treatment of shelter animals. Although it killed the majority of dogs it took in, the PSPCA provided food, water, and a longer stray hold, and used less painful stray-roundup and euthanasia methods than the city pound employed.²⁹

The vast majority of American shelters in the 1800s and most of the 1900s killed most of the dogs and cats taken in. Animal welfare advocates focused on humane euthanasia methods, not on ending the killing. It was thought that a quick, painless death was preferable to life on the street as a stray. However, many methods used throughout sheltering's history—including clubbing, drowning, electrocution, decompression chamber, and carbon monoxide poisoning—were neither quick nor painless.

Early advocates also promoted removing animal killing from public view, believing it harmed children's moral development. To this day, shelters are often located on the outskirts of town, near the local landfill, water treatment plant, or jail.

The growth of private facilities alongside municipal shelters began changing the public's view of stray



Image courtesy ASPCA

Early animal services existed to control rabies by capturing and killing strays. Common methods used were clubbing, strangling, and drowning, as shown in the illustration above. The *New York Times* reported 738 dogs were drowned in the East River in one day, on July 8, 1877.

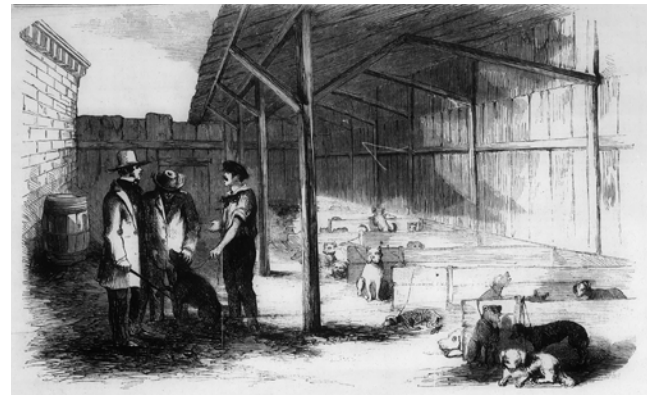


Image from Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

Pounds typically held animals together in one pen or area, as in this 1858 illustration, often without food or water. Today, best practice calls for separation of species (cats and dogs), ages (juveniles and adults), and vulnerable populations (sick animals, mothers with litters).



Photo courtesy Abq. Museum

Albuquerque's animal shelter, 1949. Sheltering practices and facilities remained essentially unchanged until the mid-20th century.

animals as health hazards. Increased veterinary involvement in sheltering, starting in the 1970s, shifted the focus toward humane care, treatment programs, and preventing overpopulation.

No Kill Movement

The No Kill movement in the U.S. is often said to have started in 1989, due to two events that year. First, the San Francisco SPCA (SFSPCA) terminated its contract to run animal control and sheltering for the city, forcing the municipal government to open its own animal care and control department. This allowed the SFSPCA to reinvent itself as an early model of today's emerging pet resource center, focusing on live release of every adoptable animal.³⁰

The other was the publication of activist Ed Duvin's "In the Name of Mercy." This influential essay argued for shelter reform and adherence to humane values and practices within the animal welfare movement. "A true shelter should be a place where life is affirmed, both in teaching and practice, not a building permeated with the odor of death," Duvin wrote.³¹

The 1990s saw efforts to convert "kill" shelters to "no-kill" shelters as advocates promoted saving every adoptable animal and, later, saving every animal. No-kill is defined as a 90 percent live release rate, meaning the animal leaves the shelter alive through

adoption, transfer to another shelter or rescue, or other placement.

Nationally, euthanasia rates have plummeted, for example, from 17 million in 1984 to about 650,000 in 2025.³² This is a collective achievement to be celebrated.

At the same time, the No Kill movement has sparked debate and even division among animal advocates and professionals. Some argue the no-kill-status metric (90 percent live release) is misleading because it does not account for animals turned away from the shelter through managed intake, strays left on the street, or litters of puppies and kittens abandoned to fend for themselves or die.

Some also see contemporary shelter problems—such as longer lengths of stay for intakes, overcrowding, and public vilification of "kill" shelters—as unintended consequences of the highly visible No Kill campaign.

Regardless of their position on "no kill," advocates are increasingly calling for a comprehensive approach that combines both prevention (spay/neuter, safety net programs) and euthanasia reduction.

Animal Sheltering Today

Animal sheltering has changed significantly over the past 25 years, focusing on reducing euthanasia of healthy animals, preventing shelter intake, and promoting adoptions. The public (mostly) no longer views homeless animals as nuisances to be killed but as beings deserving care.

In 2025, there were 4,110 animal shelters in the U.S., taking in 5.8 million dogs and cats, according to Shelter Animals Count, a collaborative initiative that maintains a national database of sheltering statistics. Around 4.2 million of these animals were adopted. Non-live outcomes (euthanasia and natural death) totaled 657,000 nationally.³³

Types of Animal Shelters

Shelters differ depending on their legal structure, oversight mechanism, and funding sources. These differences often influence shelter operations and services provided to the community. As defined by Shelter Animals Count, the three most common types of brick-and-mortar shelters follow³⁴:

Photo by Jim Uruquhart/AP Images for HWA



Utah advocates symbolically destroy a shelter's gas chamber in 2013. New Mexico's Animal Sheltering Act prohibits 16 methods of euthanasia, including the gas and decompression chambers, replaced with euthanasia by injection by the early 2000s.

Municipal and county-run shelters are government-run, open-admission facilities funded by taxes and fees. Typically, they must accept all animals, often leading to overcrowding, disease, and euthanasia for space. In recent years, some open-admission facilities have adopted managed intake to control shelter population. Services include pet licensing, adoptions, lost and found, disaster relief, and increasingly, low-cost veterinary care and education.

Private nonprofit shelters can limit intake to manage capacity of care, disease, and euthanasia. Many are humane societies and/or no-kill, focusing on adoption and community education. In 2024, 52 percent of U.S. shelters identified as no-kill, more than double the percent in 2016.³⁵

Hybrid models are typically nonprofits with government contracts, forming public-private partnerships.

While services to the community are often free or discounted, animal shelters face significant operational costs, with often limited revenue streams.

Reliance on Partnerships

Most animal shelters rely to varying degrees on external partnerships and volunteers to supplement the work done by paid staff. This is an unusual model for a public service. Other agencies, such as law enforcement, fire rescue, or road maintenance, operate with paid staffs, without question or justification. When a public service relies on unpaid labor, such as a rural volunteer fire department, it is the exception to the rule, driven by resource limitations and sporadic need.

In contrast, most animal shelters in the U.S., even government-run agencies in urban areas, rely heavily on volunteers and external partnerships, such as animal rescues, “Friends of” groups, prison dog programs, and other supports. In some cases, shelter operations depend entirely on volunteer engagement, such as off-site foster-based animal care.

Animal Rescues and Sanctuaries

Rescues are essential partners to the shelter system, and the system does not work without them. Since the 1990s launch of the No Kill movement, animal rescue groups have been on the rise. They help animals find

homes, and some provide lifelong sanctuary for the ones who will never be adopted.

Rescue organizations are mostly private nonprofits. Many specialize. Some focus on specific breeds, such as pit bulls or huskies. Others work with particular species, whether that is cats, dogs, raptors, or reptiles. Others organize by type, such as lapdogs or working breeds. Some focus on a life stage, taking on puppies or kittens, seniors, or hospice animals, such as Kindred Spirits Animal Sanctuary in rural Santa Fe County.

Rescues can also do work shelters cannot scale to, providing specialized care and support and holding animals longer. Many operate on a foster-based model, which is generally less stressful for the animals involved and can provide valuable information about behavior “in the home.” Many rescues rely on a network of volunteer foster homes that can be difficult for some to attract and maintain.

Like the shelters they support, rescues manage challenges. Rescued animals with behavioral issues can be time consuming and costly to rehabilitate. The cost of veterinary services and medical supplies continues to rise, challenging rescues to keep up with the healthcare needs of animals in their care. High turnover in rescue organizations can lead to loss of knowledge and continuity in care adversely affecting animal care. These challenges can result in substandard care and even animal cruelty and hoarding issues that, in turn, impact local animal shelters. Poor standards in animal shelters in turn impact rescues pulling animals from those facilities.

Volunteers

Most shelters rely on volunteers, from a few individuals to a corps many times the size of the staff. For example, Española Humane’s staff of 65 is supported by over 450 volunteers. (See page 40.)

Some of the critical activities volunteers undertake include fostering shelter animals in the home, animal care (walking dogs, cuddling cats, bottle-feeding orphans, cleaning/laundry), enrichment (creating mental stimulation games or treats, taking dogs offsite for outings), and adoption support (“marketing” animals inside and outside the shelters, taking animals to offsite adoption events, talking with the public about the animals).

Volunteering can offer purpose and fulfillment for retirees and younger people alike. However, there is increasing concern in the industry about the sustainability of long-term volunteerism due to compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and burnout. Additionally, reliance on volunteer labor may mask the true costs of a community's animal sheltering system.

"Friends of" Groups

Nonprofit "Friends of" groups also provide critical support to shelters. Even government-funded facilities may rely on their Friends group to supplement budgets, provide prevention support such as spay/neuter and vaccine clinics, promote adoptions, recruit volunteers, and sponsor events. For example, Friends of San Miguel County Animals routinely purchases supplies for the Las Vegas Animal Care Center because the city's procurement process takes longer.

Animal Shelter Workforce

Official data services do not collect specific statistics on New Mexico's animal shelter workforce. However, insights can be gleaned from general sources.

Nationally, the shelter labor force is characterized by commitment to animal welfare, low compensation, and high rates of job-related stress. Small shelters might have just two or three employees, such as a director and one or two animal care technicians, supported by volunteers. Larger shelters tend to have distinct administrative, veterinary, and daily facility/animal care staff. Key positions can include director, kennel manager, adoption specialist, foster/volunteer coordinator, shelter veterinarian, vet tech, and HR, IT, and accounting staff. When animal care and control fall under the same agency, field service officers are also key employees.

The shelter veterinarian is usually the highest paid employee in the organization (typically earning less than in private practice), followed by the director. Animal care staff typically earn a modest wage (average \$16.28/hour). Nationally, nonfarm animal care staff are heavily female-dominated (over 75 percent), and skew young (54 percent under age 35) and white (around 75 percent).³⁶ Nearly half have college degrees even though the position typically requires only a high school diploma.

Many people enter animal welfare careers because

they love animals, only to find themselves obligated to witness or participate in practices they wouldn't choose. Moral injury is a major contributor to the profession's high rate of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout.³⁷ (See "Mental Health," page 52.)

The New Field of Shelter Medicine

Until the late 1970s, the veterinary community had little input into shelter management policies. Over the next three decades, the field of shelter veterinary medicine emerged.

Founded in 2001, the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) led the establishment of shelter medicine board certification and expanded curricula in veterinary schools. ASV's *Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters* debuted in 2010; the second edition was published in 2022.³⁸ The ASV also serves as a resource to other professional organizations, such as the American Veterinary Medical Association, on legislative or regulatory issues pertaining to animal care in group housing facilities.

Today, the University of Florida offers a shelter medicine degree program; other American universities offer certificate programs and speciality tracks within their colleges of veterinary medicine. The University of California, Davis, houses the influential Koret Shelter Medicine Program, a welfare-centric, science-based sheltering research, service, and teaching program.³⁹

Pet Resource Center Model

The 2023 opening of Best Friends Animal Society's state-of-the-art Pet Resource Center in Bentonville, Arkansas, garnered national recognition of a viable, appealing alternative to the warehouse shelter model.⁴⁰ Across the U.S., and in New Mexico, shelters are increasingly adopting this model.

Like the traditional shelter, an animal resource center provides temporary animal housing, but it additionally offers safety net services to help keep pets and families together. These often include low-cost veterinary care, financial assistance programs, behavioral support, a foster network, pet training, and owner education. Architecturally, pet resource centers differ from the utilitarian warehouse shelter, by offering natural light, inviting public areas, play yards, and dedicated work areas for enrichment, behavior training, veterinary care, and staff needs.⁴¹

What Animal Shelters Do

Despite the progress in animal sheltering discussed previously, investment in the sheltering system has lagged far behind what is expected of it.

Over the last century and a half, reform movements have reshaped what happens inside the animal shelter, but they have rarely touched the underlying structure of a system built largely for containment and extermination of unwanted animals. Adoption programs, spay/neuter, rescue, transport, foster, behavioral support, community programs, managed intake—each of these responded to a real problem. And each was added on top of an older foundation that was never redesigned. Fortunately, that long-overdue redesign is happening now.

A specific shelter's offerings will vary based on type of structure (government, nonprofit, hybrid), operational budget, facility capacity, location, and staff capacity. A well-resourced urban shelter and a two-person rural operation may share the same mission statement but operate completely differently. That said, most shelter work falls into four main categories, often with overlap or interdependency.

Animal Services

One of the largest shelter activities focuses on the animals themselves. How "animal" is defined varies. It can refer to companion animals such as dogs and cats; exotics such as snakes, rabbits, and birds; or large farm animals. Injured and orphaned wildlife are typically managed by state wildlife agencies and nonprofit wildlife rescues. (See "Wildlife Rehab," page 128.)

The most widely known service relates to intake, care, and outcomes for the animals that come to the shelter. Most animal shelters accept stray, lost, abandoned, and (temporary or permanently) surrendered animals.

Intake involves documentation and assessment of the animals (coordinating with animal control, as relevant) and includes physical and behavioral evaluations of each animal.

Care covers housing (often kennels), food and water, enrichment, and sometimes behavioral training. Where veterinary services are offered on site, they typically include vaccinations, at minimum, and spay/neuter surgeries, microchipping, and sometimes behavioral medication. In-house veterinary capacity



Upon intake, animals are scanned for microchip, weighed, age-determined, examined, and named. Above: A puppy exam at Española Humane

is limited in many shelters; care depends on partnerships with local veterinary practices, if there are any.

Outcomes refer to the ways an animal leaves the shelter, alive or deceased. These include owner reclaim; adoption by a new owner; transfer to another shelter or rescue; return of cats to their neighborhood (see "TNR," page 50); natural death; euthanasia for space (i.e., to make room for new intakes); and humane euthanasia of animals assessed as dangerous, terminally ill, or irremediably suffering. Each of these involves specific professional decisions and operations which the public often knows little about. Nevertheless, social media posts making snap judgments about complex realities are common.

A shelter's outcomes reveals critical information about both the shelter and the community or communities responsible for its intakes.

Community Safety Net Programs

Many shelters now run programs that extend beyond the walls of the building. These include low-cost veterinary clinics for wellness, vaccinations, microchipping, and sterilization; humane education for kids and adults; post-adoption support in the form of behavior helplines, training resources, and someone to call when things get hard in the first few weeks.

Sometimes all people need is a little help. Families in financial hardship do not want to give up their pets. Sometimes all they need is a bag of food for the next



A sampling of shelter work (clockwise from top left): Caring for a neonatal kitten; providing enrichment (hidey hole, toys); bathing a new intake; promoting adoption at Edgewood Animal Shelter's annual Woofstock event; an on-site crematory

few weeks while they get back on their feet. Pet food pantries are cheap to operate, prevent intake, and strengthen the relationship between the shelter and the community it serves.

Often in partnership with local agencies, some shelters provide temporary care for animals whose owners are facing crises such as hospitalization, domestic violence, or loss of housing. Accordingly, animal shelters play an increasingly important role in supporting human service operations.

All of these safety net programs exist because keeping pets in the homes they already have is less expensive, less traumatic for both pets and people, and more sustainable than processing them through the shelter and out the other side.

Local Government Support

In most jurisdictions, animal shelters are also the go-to for local governments needing subject matter experts to assist with public safety initiatives such as pet licensing, field services (animal control), and disaster response.

Municipal and government-contracted shelters may

also provide disposal services for deceased animals from animal control agencies and veterinary hospitals.

Emergency Response Support

Animal shelters increasingly play a critical role in local emergency management. Before disaster strikes, shelters prepare their own evacuation and emergency operations plans, promote animal-owner preparedness, and connect local emergency managers to animal-related experts such as veterinarians and animal transport partners. During a disaster, shelters may provide emergency sheltering for evacuees' animals or another shelter's animals. During recovery, shelters work to reunify animals and owners.

Summary

The shelter remains the single legal and practical entry point for nearly every companion animal issue in a given jurisdiction. No matter the issue—whether it's a lost dog, injured cat, unwanted litter, cruelty case, dangerous animal, owner surrender, transfer from a partner, or emergency intake during a disaster—it's handled by the same staff in the same building.

North Central Region's Animal Shelters

Of New Mexico's roughly 45 animal shelters, 10 are located in the north central region. Together, they report operating at or above capacity about 90 percent of the time. That statistic alone speaks to the pressure facing shelter staff, volunteers, and local governments. But behind the numbers is a more complex story: one of innovation, adaptation, and steady effort to improve care for animals while responding to chronic overcrowding, limited veterinary access, and years of disrupted spay/neuter funding.

Specialized Approaches

Every shelter in the region provides the basics of animal care and adoption, but several have developed specialized approaches that reflect local needs.

Raton Humane Society, for example, has achieved a 100 percent live release rate in part by transporting nearly half of its intakes to a prison dog program in Colorado. That marks a dramatic change from the shelter's early days, when—in 1982, for example—the shelter took in 1,186 dogs and cats and euthanized 713 of them, or about 60 percent.

Española Humane, working from a relatively small facility, manages heavy intake with a strong foster network that cares for about half of its animals off site.

Las Vegas Animal Care Center stands out for its work with feral and semi-feral dogs, a population many shelters struggle to manage. In partnership with Friends of San Miguel County Animals, it also offers an annual training focused on fearful and feral dogs.⁴²

Shelters in Transition

Over the 18 months during which this report was prepared, several shelters in the study area underwent substantial transitions.

For example, in 2025 Stray Hearts closed for several months after operating at reported levels as high as 185 percent of capacity. During that period, Taos County had no animal shelter or holding facility for strays. The nonprofit shelter used the hiatus to create a strategic plan, set stricter intake limits, hire a new executive director and staff, refurbish the facility, and strengthen community partnerships before reopening in December 2025. Stray Hearts has since renewed its contract with the Town of Taos but not the county.

Photos by Liz Wolf, Heidi Baxter, and Stray Hearts



The region's facilities date from the late 1970s to the 2010s. Top L to R: Edgewood Animal Shelter, Raton Humane Society, Santa Fe Animal Shelter lobby. Bottom L to R: Stray Hearts (Taos), SH's quonset hut cattery, Los Alamos County Animal Shelter.

Española Humane also had to balance daily operations with urgent facility work, including black mold remediation and roof repair. It also achieved a major long-term investment, opening a new spay/neuter clinic on land leased from Ohkay Owingeh.

Capital projects are another sign of how shelter systems are trying to catch up with growing demand. In Las Vegas, Mayor David Romero announced plans for a modern 10,000-square-foot facility to replace the city's cramped 1970s-era shelter. While that project moves forward, the current shelter has undergone interim upgrades, including deep cleaning; new flooring, insulation, lighting, and paint; and a new cat room to make the building more livable.

In Sandoval County, officials broke ground in February 2026 on a new Animal Resource Center in Bernalillo. County leaders said the \$8.7 million project will provide room for 50 to 60 dogs and 12 to 20 cats, along with training rooms, separate spaces for larger dogs, quarantine capacity, and public education resources. Commission Chair Jordan Juarez framed the project as a response to rapid county growth and the need to expand adoption opportunities.

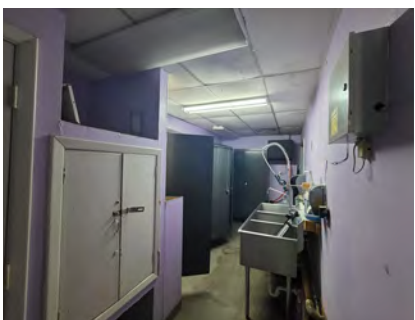
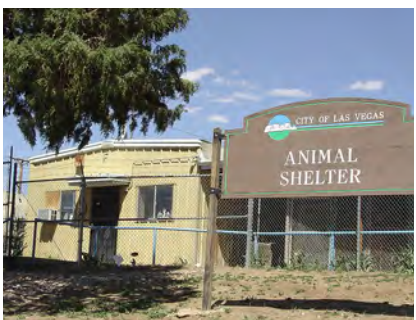
Shelter Changes Across New Mexico

Beyond the study area, a similar pattern emerges. Grants Animal Care Center temporarily closed to address severe overcrowding, at one point housing 94 animals when its goal was 50 or fewer. In Ruidoso, the Humane Society of Lincoln County completed an Emergency Operations Plan to prepare for ongoing wildfire and flooding threats. And Bernalillo County approved \$4.9 million for a new animal adoption and education center in Albuquerque. The facility, located in a to-be-renovated vet hospital, aims to reduce shelter overcrowding at the current Bernalillo County Animal Care and Resource Center while providing a more accessible location for animal adoptions and community services.⁴³

Together, these examples show the balancing act New Mexico's shelters face. They must care for animals every day while also responding to infrastructure challenges, staffing needs, disaster risks, and the long-term need for upgraded facilities.

For representation and support, shelter personnel can join NMCAN (New Mexico Companion Animal Network), a statewide coalition of shelter leaders.⁴⁴

Photos by Heidi Baxter, Española Humane, and Las Vegas shelter



Top L to R: Española Humane's reception area, EH undertook mold remediation in 2026, new EH Animal Clinic. Bottom: Las Vegas shelter exterior, LV shelter before new paint and flooring in 2026, rendering of the planned new LV Animal Care Center.

North Central New Mexico Animal Shelters

LOCATION, NAME, TYPE	FOUNDED	INTAKES ⁴⁵	LIVE OUTCOMES	# STAFF	# VOL.	BUDGET	SERVICES
COLFAX COUNTY: RATON HUMANE SOCIETY Nonprofit with city lease	1979	231	100%	3	10+	\$130,000	Adoption, humane education, owner surrender, pet food pantry, prison dog program, spay/neuter voucher program and clinics, straw distribution, stray intake, TNR, transfer
LOS ALAMOS COUNTY: LOS ALAMOS COUNTY ANIMAL CONTROL DIVISION Government	1939 (facility 2010s)	560	95%	5 (shelter and animal control)	127	\$530,000	Adoption, microchip, ID tags, rabies quarantine, vaccines and blood work for heartworm in dogs, FELV/FIV for cats
MORA COUNTY: NONE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
RIO ARRIBA COUNTY: ESPAÑOLA HUMANE Nonprofit with city, county, and tribal contracts	1992 (facility 1980s)	3,286	90%	65	465	\$5.7M	Adoption, foster, microchips, owner surrender, pet food delivery, prison dog program, spay/neuter clinic, staff wellness and compassion fatigue training, stray intake, TNR, transfer, vaccines, veterinary services, youth program
SAN MIGUEL COUNTY: CITY OF LAS VEGAS ANIMAL CARE CENTER Government	2022 (facility 1970s)	750	94%	4	Varies seasonally 3–40	\$564,000	Adoption, fearful/feral dog rehhabilitation, foster, microchips, owner surrender, pet food pantry, stray intake, transfer, low cost vaccines; new facility plans to open in 2027
SANDOVAL COUNTY, Bernalillo: SANDOVAL COUNTY ANIMAL RESOURCE CENTER Government	2020	131	95%	7	30	NA	Adoption, microchips, owner surrender, spay/neuter, stray intake, transfer, vaccines; new facility plans to open in 2027
SANDOVAL COUNTY: CITY OF RIO RANCHO ANIMAL RESOURCE CENTER Government	NA	1,496	85%	NA	NA	NA	Adoption, owner surrender, spay/neuter, straw distribution, stray intake
SANDOVAL COUNTY, Rio Rancho: WATERMELON MOUNTAIN RANCH Nonprofit	2018	656	100%	19	75	\$1.1M	Adoption, humane education, juvenile justice program, owner surrender, resale shop, rescue, sanctuary, special needs program
SANTA FE COUNTY: EDGEWOOD ANIMAL SHELTER Government	2014	524	95%	3	6	\$299,810	Adoption, barn cat program, owner surrender, stray intake, transfer
SANTA FE COUNTY: SANTA FE ANIMAL SHELTER Nonprofit with city and county contracts	1939 (facility 2010s)	3,360	94%	109	744	\$10.4M	Adoption, community assistance program, foster, guardian assistance, Operation Meow partner, owner surrender, resale shop, spay/neuter clinic, stray intake, Thaw Animal Hospital, TNR, transfer
TAOS COUNTY: STRAY HEARTS Nonprofit with city contract	1991	900	96%	18	40	\$1.08M	Adoption, foster, microchip, owner surrender, pet food pantry, spay/neuter clinics, transfer, vaccination
15 PUEBLOS IN REGION: NONE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Findings

This section describes the needs and service gaps identified by the study area's stakeholders, beginning with systemic realities beyond the sheltering system's control. These are followed by three interconnected areas: shelter infrastructure and operations, staffing challenges, and resource limitations.

Basis for Findings

These findings are based on site visits and interviews with directors and key staff from animal shelters across the region, supplemented by interviews with tribal officials and staff, veterinarians, and state and national animal welfare experts. This research revealed both the day-to-day pressures shelters face and the broader policy patterns shaping them.

1. Systemic Realities

New Mexico has one of the highest per capita shelter intake rates in the United States.⁴⁶ That reality is the foundation for all of the findings that follow.

Overview of the State's Sheltering System

New Mexico has approximately 45 animal shelters and a human population of roughly 2.1 million. The total 2025 intake was 93,000 animals with an overall euthanasia rate of 21 percent, although many individual shelters maintain live release rates of 90 percent or higher.⁴⁷ The resulting intake rate, 44.3 animals per 1,000 residents, is nearly triple the national benchmark of 16 to 17.5 intakes per 1,000 people. Even compared to strained rural areas (averaging 25 intakes per 1,000 people), New Mexico's rate is much higher.⁴⁸

Historically, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS, now Humane World for Animals) has estimated that shelter intake should be roughly 3 percent of the human population. For 2.1 million people, this would equal roughly 63,000 animals annually. New Mexico's total of 93,000 represents 4.4 percent of the human population, exceeding the historical baseline.

Additionally, in a largely rural state like New Mexico, scarcity is structural. There are fewer veterinarians, fewer clinics, fewer trained staff and animal control officers, fewer public and philanthropic dollars, and fewer neighboring organizations to absorb overflow.

Distance compounds the scarcity. Visibility is also a struggle. Animal welfare problems are harder to document and easier for state-level decision-makers to overlook. That invisibility reinforces underinvestment, which in turn reinforces scarcity, which in turn reinforces the crisis.

An intake rate as high as New Mexico's points to systemic challenges, rather than seasonal fluctuations or crisis-driven surge events. The top systemic challenges identified are: weak oversight and regulation; severe pet overpopulation and stray density; veterinary workforce shortages and vet care access and cost; and animal-owner responsibility issues and barriers to pet retention.

Oversight and Regulation

New Mexico requires government-run and government-contracted shelters to comply with minimum shelter standards, passed in 2021.⁴⁹ However, some smaller and/or rural shelters risk noncompliance due to lack of resources.

Additionally, neither private animal shelters nor non-equine animal rescues and sanctuaries are regulated in New Mexico. NMDOG, a nonprofit advocacy organization, reports that most of the animal hoarding situations it responded to statewide over a period of 16 years involved self-identified animal sanctuaries, not individuals. In fact, one "sanctuary" operator admitted to leaving their original site in Colorado—to avoid regulation by that state's Pet Animal Care and Facilities Act (PACFA)—to resume animal hoarding in New Mexico, without fear of penalty.⁵⁰

Dog and Cat Overpopulation

Unchecked breeding has led to populations of dogs and cats that exceed the region's shelter capacity. Given this backdrop, it's not surprising that the number one challenge voiced by the region's sheltering workforce was: "The sheer number of animals."

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023) exacerbated the situation: veterinary services were deemed non-essential and spay/neuter surgeries were limited or stalled. Nationally, this led to an estimated 2.7 million canine and feline births that otherwise would have been prevented.⁵¹

In New Mexico, compounding the problem, funds from the state's Affordable Spay/Neuter Assistance Program were not distributed for five years due to concern within State Offices over ongoing litigation against the law creating its predominant funding mechanism, enacted by 2020's Senate Bill 57.

New Mexico shelters are now full of the offspring of animals not altered as a consequence of those decisions, on top of decades of State underinvestment in prevention.

Dogs can have up to two litters per year for about seven years. Cats can produce up to three litters per year for about 10 years. This means that one pair of intact canines and their offspring can create 67,000 dogs in just six years; a pair of unaltered felines and their offspring can produce 420,000 cats in just seven years, according to Spay Taos, a clinic in Taos County.

This pattern of exponential population growth is why prevention is the bedrock of effective companion animal welfare policy, combined with euthanasia reduction, adoption promotion, and safety net services.

Pet overpopulation impacts animal control departments as well as shelters. For example, in 2023, Taos County officers recorded 548 stray dogs and 70 animal bites.⁵² County officials had discontinued picking up loose dogs at the time as there was no space for them at the local shelter.

Veterinary Issues

Along with much of the United States, New Mexico faces a severe veterinary workforce shortage. "The whole state is underserved," says State Veterinarian Dr. Samantha Holeck.

New Mexico has over 1,120 active, licensed veterinarians, according to the state Board of Veterinary Medicine's August 2025 list. While this overall ratio of vets to households appears acceptable, the geographical breakdown tells a different story.⁵³

First, 375+ veterinarians on the list (33 percent) have out-of-state addresses; it is unknown how many actually practice in New Mexico. Second, 345 veterinarians (30 percent) practice in the urban central Rio Grande Corridor (Albuquerque, Rio Rancho, Santa Fe). Third, many New Mexico veterinarians are nearing



Dr. Tom Parker (left), Española Humane Medical Director for nearly 10 years, passed the role on to Dr. Chandra Lilly in 2026. Shelter veterinarian positions are especially hard to fill.

retirement; at least two north central practitioners said they wished to retire but stayed due to the shortage. Finally, of the roughly 210 veterinarians in the study area, the largest percentages are in urban/suburban areas, and four of the area's eight counties have severely limited coverage (Mora 1, San Miguel 6, Colfax 7, Taos 11). None of the 15 Pueblos in the region has on-site veterinary coverage.

Overall, 30 of the state's 33 counties have limited access to vet care.⁵⁴ Severe workforce shortages are especially seen in rural areas, tribal communities, emergency and after-hours care, equine and large-animal practice, mixed animal practice, veterinary disaster response, and shelter medicine.

Reasons for the vet shortage include insufficient veterinary colleges to meet shelter medicine needs; hard-to-fill shelter vet vacancies (due to often heavier workload and lower compensation than in private practice); COVID-19 scheduling backlogs; and increasing franchise acquisition of vet hospitals, many of which do not offer low-cost services.

Another reason for the shortage is the well-documented mental health crisis within the veterinary profession. This reveals itself in elevated rates of depression, burnout, and a disproportionately high rate of suicide compared to that of the general population. Cultural, emotional, and financial factors all contribute, as explained by Not One More Vet, an advocacy organization.⁵⁵

The national shortage of veterinarians “has depleted every sector of the profession, including private practices, emergency and specialty clinics, agricultural practices, public health departments, and veterinary college faculty,” according to a 2024 study published in the *Journal of Shelter Medicine and Community Animal Health*.⁵⁶

“Failure to act risks reversing progress in reducing unnecessary pet euthanasia and adversely impacts the health of pets, their families, and the well-being of shelter and veterinary professionals,” the authors conclude.

The study found that organizations caring for the most vulnerable cats and dogs have been hardest hit: roughly 75 percent of the shelters and low-cost clinics researched reported vacant veterinarian positions, delaying preventive healthcare, spay/neuter, and treatment of sick and injured pets. For a New Mexico example, in July 2026 the Santa Fe Animal Shelter was advertising for a total of nine veterinary positions for its spay/neuter clinic and Thaw Animal Hospital.

Not only veterinarians are in short supply in New Mexico. “Lack of adequate support limits the care that we can provide,” explains Dr. Hannah Leonard, who serves on the New Mexico Board of Veterinary Medicine and practices at VCA Hospitals in Albuquerque. “It would be immensely helpful if we had more qualified Registered Veterinary Technicians (RVTs),” the counterpart to a nurse in human medicine.

Animal Owner Issues

The region’s shelter challenges are heavily influenced by New Mexico pet owners themselves. Stakeholders cited two interconnected problems: owners need to better understand what constitutes humane pet care, and they need better access to services and supports that keep pets with their families and out of shelters.

Common practices in New Mexico—such as chaining dogs, letting animals roam, leaving pets intact without a permit, backyard breeding, not identifying pets with a microchip or tags, and providing little or no veterinary care—can be addressed with respectful community education and resources.

Letting pets roam was common for many American households until the 1970s. It is still part of the culture in many, especially rural, communities, even

though New Mexico statute requires each county and municipality to establish local ordinances to manage loose animals.⁵⁷ The practice is also common in tribal communities, which historically and today may provide food and water for neighborhood dogs and cats without considering them “owned.” Many tribal animal ordinances also include provisions for dogs running at large.

Animal control officers, animal services providers, veterinarians, social workers, and educators can collaborate on holistic service delivery to reach underserved areas. Humane education can be provided via schools, community centers, and media campaigns to reach children and adults alike.

Reasons for Shelter Intake

The net result of these animal-owner issues is that shelters are forced to absorb the consequences and costs generated by societal barriers to pet retention. Common reasons for relinquishment or abandonment of animals include:

- **Scarcity of pet-inclusive housing:** Across New Mexico, there is a shortage of affordable and available rental homes. Landlords often prohibit large dogs and bully and other breeds. Families face the heart-wrenching decision of choosing between housing and pets. To keep pets in homes requires keeping people in homes.
- **Animal care costs:** The costs of pet food and supplies are rising, often forcing underserved families to choose between human and pet well-being.
- **Veterinary care access and cost:** Pets belonging to underserved owners have a better chance of remaining in the home when veterinary care is available and affordable. Transportation and New Mexico’s shortage of emergency/after-hours clinics are also barrier to veterinary care.
- **Short-term crisis situations:** Domestic violence, eviction, hospitalization, incarceration, or other personal crises can create the need for temporary housing for people with pets. Without options to keep or reunite with their pet, owners may be forced to relinquish it to a shelter. (See “Domestic Violence Co-Sheltering,” page 66.)

“The 6,000 surgeries we’ve performed since the clinic opened in 2024 have prevented thousands of unwanted litters.”

—Donna Karr,
Executive Director,
Spay Taos

It’s been a common refrain of shelter leaders for years: “We can’t adopt our way out of pet overpopulation.” Providers of free and low-cost spay/neuter services are critical partners in humane animal care and control. In north central New Mexico, these include brick-and-mortar facilities, MASH-style clinics, and a donor-funded partnership with a local vet hospital. All of these models depend on reliable funding, such as that provided by the New Mexico Affordable Spay/Neuter Law, first enacted in 2020 by Senate Bill 57, then made permanent by the 2026 State Legislature.

Spay Taos

Spay Taos is a nonprofit clinic providing free spay/neuter services for northern New Mexico. Opened in May 2024, it is the first full-time, no-cost spay/neuter clinic in Taos County. The clinic has already altered 6,000 dogs and cats and administered 9,500 vaccines.

The clinic employs a veterinary team of three and an executive director, who until recently was unpaid. More than 35 active volunteers contribute thousands of hours annually, including several retired nurses and other skilled professionals. A veterinary relief network helps maintain continuity of care.



A volunteer checks on recovering dogs.



Photos by Heidi Baxter/APNM

Spay Taos employs one veterinarian, two vet techs, a vet assistant/office manager, and a director, supported by 35 volunteers.

Spay Taos runs on an annual budget of \$540,000, funded through contracts with the Town of Taos, Taos County, private donations, and foundation and state grants. Start-up costs were reduced by in-kind gifts of medical equipment, furniture, and building services.

The clinic serves residents of Taos County, including Taos Pueblo and Picuris Pueblo, and has expanded to Colfax and Mora counties, which now account for about 10 percent of animals treated. A new transportation service for pets from Mora County and southern and western parts of Taos County improves access to underserved communities.

Free services are also provided to all local animal welfare organizations, including Stray Hearts shelter. The clinic supports trap-neuter-return (TNR) efforts with cat traps and free surgeries—700 so far.

In a new, prevention-focused coalition, Spay Taos also partners with Stray Hearts and SAFE Pet Partners to help people keep their pets throughout life changes. Support includes temporary shelter, fencing, behavioral training, and vet care.

Española Humane Animal Clinic

Española Humane's new clinic has its roots in the shelter's humble double-wide veterinary trailer. There, the medical team has performed over 55,000 free spay/neuter surgeries since 2016, helping tens of thousands of animals and families. But with pet overpopulation still at crisis levels in Rio Arriba County and across the state, the shelter wanted to do more.

Funded by generous private donations, the new clinic opened to provide free spay/neuter services to all New Mexico residents, as well as low-cost urgent care and wellness services for the local community, where access to veterinary care has long been limited. The state-of-the-art 7,000-square-foot facility will increase the shelter's surgical capacity by 50 percent and help train the next generation of veterinary professionals.

"The new clinic has started off strong," says Mattie Allen, Director of Communications. "The need has been overwhelming, especially for low-cost, affordable, and accessible urgent care services." The shelter's existing clinic trailer is still in use for spay/neuter and trauma surgeries for shelter pets.

Animal Welfare Coalition of NE New Mexico

AWC was founded in 2008 by local citizens compelled to address cat and dog cruelty and neglect in Las Vegas and San Miguel County. The nonprofit operated the city animal shelter from 2013 to June 30, 2022, when it declined to renew the contract.

AWC now serves as a community resource promoting humane principles, cruelty prevention, and compassionate care. Addressing one of the community's most important animal welfare needs, AWC opened their own spay/neuter clinic in 2025, where they provide monthly services. Between MASH clinics partnered with Animal Balance, a global spay/neuter provider, and their new clinic, AWC has performed 2,269 surgeries since 2022. AWC also offers vaccine clinics, pet food distribution to residents, and volunteer opportunities for local college students.

The clinic is funded by grants and donations. "We are fortunate to have the support of so many local businesses, organizations, and community members," says AWC Board President Stephanie Pistner.



Photo by Mattie Allen/Española Humane

The new Española Humane Animal Clinic leases land from Ohkay Owingeh, a model of tribal/non-tribal partnership.

Las Vegas-San Miguel Veterinary Hospital

Spay/neuter services can also be subsidized by a private donor. Recognizing that Mora County lacks a veterinary hospital, a shelter, and an animal control program, a generous local resident offered to donate \$30,000 per year to Las Vegas-San Miguel Veterinary Hospital for subsidized spay/neuter surgeries for county residents in 11 zip codes. Since the program began in 2012, about 75 to 125 surgeries have been performed each year.

"People appreciate the program," says Practice Manager Earl Lindsley. With private practice costs as high as \$380 for a dog spay, \$265 for a dog neuter or a cat spay, and \$165 for a cat neuter, the client's copay of \$50 is very reasonable; clients also pay for vaccines. Clients need to show proof of Mora County residency and are limited to four animals per address.

Dr. Ben Nelson operates the vet hospital's mixed small- and large-animal practice and responds to 24-hour emergencies. One of only three veterinarians in the immediate area, all nearing retirement age, Dr. Nelson also teaches in the Biology Department at New Mexico Highlands University.

2. Infrastructure and Operations

Shelter Deserts

One of the clearest findings is the existence of shelter “deserts” across northern New Mexico and in tribal communities. (See also “Animal Control Deserts,” page 68.) In many places, animal welfare resources are minimal or absent. None of the region’s 15 Pueblos has its own animal shelter, and access to animal control, intake, veterinary coordination, or transport support is uneven. In fact, none of the 23 federally recognized Tribes in New Mexico has its own animal shelter.

Some tribal communities have expressed interest in memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with nearby shelters to access their services, but those agreements are difficult to secure because the shelters themselves are already operating at or beyond capacity. Communities with the fewest local services are often trying to access help from organizations that do not have capacity to expand their service area.

Even the strongest organizations in the region cannot fill this gap alone. The Santa Fe Animal Shelter, the region’s largest facility, plays a central role in intake, adoptions, veterinary care, and owner support, yet it does not have capacity to serve the entire surrounding region or absorb unmet need from nearby tribal communities. This is not a criticism of the shelter; it is evidence that the regional map of services does not match the geographic scale of need.

The experience of Stray Hearts in Taos illustrates the consequences of that mismatch. After years of capacity pressure and financial strain, the shelter temporarily closed in 2025 and later reopened with managed intake and a strict population cap. Since reopening in December 2025, Stray Hearts has emphasized transparency about what its model can and cannot do, while sharing data and explanatory materials about intake, euthanasia policy, and shelter structure.

Stray Hearts’ situation highlights a larger problem: in the absence of a municipal shelter, a nonprofit may end up trying to perform the duties of a publicly funded open-admission agency without stable public funding. That is not sustainable for Taos or similarly situated communities.

Photo by City of Las Vegas Animal Care Center



Las Vegas Animal Care Center’s 1970s-era facility needs kennel repair and other upgrades.

Communities across New Mexico need to assess their actual sheltering needs and determine which service model best fits them. In some places that may mean a municipal shelter. In others it may mean a nonprofit partner with a public contract, a dual system in which municipal and nonprofit organizations work in tandem, or a stronger emphasis on shelter diversion, return-to-owner programs, and high-quality high-volume spay/neuter. Structure matters. A community cannot assume that any shelter, regardless of design or funding model, can absorb whatever animal welfare burden has accumulated around it.

Outdated Shelter Infrastructure

Another major finding is that much of the region’s shelter infrastructure belongs to an earlier era of animal care and control. Most shelters built in the 1970s and 1980s were designed for brief stray holds resulting in owner reclaim or euthanasia. In that model, a 72-hour stay was common and the physical plant reflected that reality: rows of kennels, limited isolation space, minimal enrichment areas, and little room for medical or adoption operations. Those designs are poorly suited to current expectations that shelters will provide longer-term housing, disease control, rehabilitation, behavior support, enrichment, foster coordination, community services, adoption marketing, and even veterinary care for complex needs.

Sandoval County offers a concrete example. Its existing shelter was originally intended as a temporary facility serving about 21 animals, but it has had to function beyond that limited purpose for years while a permanent facility was planned. In 2026 the county moved forward on an 11,000-square-foot animal resource center in Bernalillo with a project cost of about \$8.7 million, underscoring how expensive it is to replace outdated infrastructure.⁵⁸

High construction and renovation costs are a reminder that modern shelters are not simply warehouses for animals. They require isolation and quarantine space, specialized ventilation, sanitation-ready surfaces, humane animal housing, exam areas, surgery or treatment capacity, enrichment and play areas, meeting space for would-be adopters, and work areas that support safe operations and staff wellness.

Today's animal shelters are more comparable to clinics or small hospitals than ordinary office buildings. Construction costs rise quickly when specialized HVAC systems, durable and sanitary materials, drainage, medical spaces, and quarantine areas are required.

Operating costs are equally significant. Modern shelters carry recurring expenses for staffing, food, sanitation, transportation, behavior support, veterinary care, medications, utilities, and insurance, and these expenses continue whether intake rises or falls. Once a community decides it wants humane, contemporary sheltering care, it is also deciding to support a service system with substantial capital and operating requirements.

Pressure to Be “No Kill”

The expectation that shelters should minimize euthanasia, or reject it entirely, has brought important ethical changes, but it has also created operational strain when communities do not fund the support systems needed for high live outcomes.

Pressure to be “no kill” can push shelters to keep animals far longer than their facilities were designed to hold them. The result may be chronic overcrowding, increased disease transmission, rising costs, staff exhaustion, and deterioration in animals’ mental and emotional condition.

This also raises difficult public safety questions. Reluctance to euthanize animals with severe



Most modern kennel runs are indoor/outdoor. Built in the 1980s, Stray Hearts’ indoor dog runs lack access to the outdoors. Daily cleaning requires staff to manually move the dogs outside, a two-hour process. The cramped space adds to the dogs’ kennel stress.



Stray Hearts’ outdoor kennels are spacious and equipped with doghouses and toys. However, bare ground cannot be sterilized, increasing the risk of disease transmission among shelter animals.



In Española Humane’s small facility, the laundry shares space with the dog kennels.

aggression can pressure shelters to hold dogs they cannot safely place, or to take risks in placement that shift danger into the community.

Shelter leaders described the need for decisions grounded in quality of life, humane care, and realistic safety assessment rather than slogans alone. Humane sheltering is not simply about avoiding death at all costs; it is about making responsible decisions that protect both animals and the public.

Types of Animals Taken In

The region's shelters are caring for animals that are increasingly difficult to place quickly. Many arrive intact, undersocialized, untrained, injured, elderly, or affected by medical or behavioral conditions requiring more time, skill, and money. In rural areas, shelters may also receive animals with little regular veterinary care or human handling, complicating intake, treatment, and adoption planning. The challenge is not simply the number of animals entering shelters, but the complexity of care many need.

In the study area, shelters report that bully breeds and bully-breed mixes make up a large share of the dog population. Those animals can face adoption barriers because rental housing policies often restrict them based on assumptions about breed rather than an individual dog's behavior. Shelters are not just trying to place dogs; they are trying to place dogs into a housing market that may structurally exclude some of the most common animals in their care. Longer stays and repeated returns can follow, deepening crowding and cost pressures.

A bright spot in the intake picture is the success of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs, which have reduced cat intake and euthanasia rates (see page 50).

Overcrowding

Overcrowding is the cumulative expression of interconnected issues. When intake is high, lengths of stay are long, and community expectations discourage euthanasia without funding alternatives, shelters face an impossible equation. Some organizations pause or limit intake to preserve humane care for animals already inside. However, limiting intake often shifts the problem to neighboring communities and increases abandonment elsewhere. Other shelters continue taking in animals and drift beyond their capacity for

Photo by Heidi Baxter/APNM



Bully breeds are the most common type of dogs taken in by the region's shelters.

They include Staffordshire bull terriers (left) and pit bulls, frequently bred and sold by backyard breeders.

care. However, exceeding capacity increases stress, noise, disease, and staff's inability to meet animals' physical and emotional needs.

Once shelters become overcrowded, disease control becomes more difficult. Respiratory disease, parvovirus, and other contagious conditions spread more easily when kennels are full, separation space is limited, and staff are stretched thin. Behavioral decline also accelerates. Dogs and cats often deteriorate in crowded shelter environments, becoming harder to place and extending their stays, which worsens crowding further.

Long lengths of stay are especially damaging because many facilities were not built for them. Animals may remain for weeks or months in spaces designed for short holds, leading to higher costs and chronic kennel stress that can make animals fearful, reactive, shut down, or difficult to handle. In some cases, animals who might have succeeded in a home earlier become unsafe or unadoptable after prolonged confinement.

For these reasons, reducing length of stay and managing intake are core welfare strategies. Shelters that cannot move animals safely and efficiently through the system will continue to face higher medical costs, lower live outcomes, and more stress on staff and animals. Stakeholders were clear that overcrowding cannot be solved inside the kennel alone; it must be addressed upstream through prevention, owner support, field services, and realistic capacity planning.

3. Staffing Challenges

Staffing is a major pressure point in the regional sheltering system. Shelter leaders consistently described a workforce challenged by low pay, limited advancement pathways, inadequate training resources, high turnover, and the emotional intensity of the work itself. These conditions contribute to chronic understaffing, which in turn limits everything else a shelter can do.

When frontline staff are consumed by basic daily care, organizations have little capacity left for strategic planning that could reduce intake over time and foster coordination, field response, owner support, prevention programming, and disaster planning.

Compensation, Recruitment, Turnover

Compensation is a concrete part of that challenge. In 2026, New Mexico's statewide minimum wage remains \$12.00 per hour, and animal care work in shelters often pays only modestly above that floor. The national median hourly wage for animal care and service workers is \$16.28, aligning closely with wages some local shelters have advertised for full-time animal care positions.⁵⁹ Many shelter jobs demand physically exhausting, emotionally difficult, public-facing work while offering relatively low pay for the responsibilities involved. Certain positions, such as shelter veterinarian and vet tech, are especially hard to fill.

Shelter work is also stigmatized in ways that compound stress. It involves animal waste, medical mess, injury, death, and difficult public interactions, and is sometimes dismissed as "dirty work" rather than skilled frontline service. That gap in public understanding can leave shelter workers feeling invisible and unfairly judged.

All of these factors contribute to high turnover. According to the Association for Animal Welfare Advancement, the national median animal welfare workforce turnover rate is 28 percent.⁶⁰ Whatever the precise measure, retention is a major challenge, directly affecting continuity and quality of care.

Volunteers face many of the same pressures and can become disenfranchised when support is poor or expectations are unclear.

These conditions destabilize organizations. Frequent

turnover means more time spent recruiting and training, less institutional memory, and fewer experienced staff able to manage difficult cases. The cumulative effect is worker burnout, reduced cohesion, and lower capacity to implement programs that would make sheltering more humane and effective.

"Zombie" Issues and Leadership Failures

Shelter personnel not only respond to tragedy; they are often asked to absorb the ethical consequences of a system that failed long before the animal reached the kennel. Stakeholders described recurring strain from "zombie" issues that never resolve, such as loose animals, neglect, backyard breeding, animal dumping, and weak enforcement. Shelter and rescue personnel named a kind of "bureaucratic trauma" that stems from repeatedly seeking help and trying to implement solutions, only to see little change from authorities with the power to effect it.

For some, the deepest distress comes from knowing what would reduce suffering and being unable to secure institutional buy-in, resources, or action from state and/or local leadership.

Mental Health as Essential Infrastructure

Some organizations are beginning to respond more intentionally. Stray Hearts, for example, has publicly budgeted for staff mental health support as part of its organizational rebuilding, explicitly linking staff well-being to retention and better outcomes for animals.⁶¹ That approach treats mental health support not as a luxury but as essential infrastructure.

Similarly, Española Humane now budgets for and provides staff wellness and compassion fatigue training.⁶² Happier, healthier staff provide steadier care, and reducing turnover avoids costs that can drain limited budgets.

The broader lesson is that workforce stability cannot be separated from animal welfare outcomes. If communities want humane sheltering systems, they must treat shelter labor as skilled public-interest work deserving decent wages, training, advancement, and psychological support. Without that investment, burnout will remain a hidden driver of poor outcomes, no matter how committed individual workers may be.

Terminology

Companion (or pet)

cat: Lives primarily inside a home and is cared for by an owner

Community cat: Broad term for any unowned, free-roaming cat who lives outdoors

Feral cat: Community cat with little to no human socialization, making it unadoptable

Stray cat: Community cat who was formerly a companion cat; lives outdoors; may be lost, abandoned, or currently unowned; remains socialized to humans; often can be adopted

Cat colony: Group of community/feral cats living in the same geographic area to share food sources and ward off predators; colony size can be small (5–10), medium (10–20), or large (up to 50)

Removing cats from the streets by putting them in the already overcrowded shelter system or killing them doesn't solve the problems created by growing cat communities. Preventing reproduction (spay/neuter) and supporting a healthy, disease-free community through vaccination does.

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is the current practice replacing "trap and kill," which has long been proven ineffective for controlling cat populations.⁶⁴ Humane traps are used to contain the cats and transport them to a veterinarian for sterilization and a health exam. Once treated, the cats are returned to their removal location, with their left ear "tipped" during surgery as a visual sign of their sterilization. TNVR is the acronym often used instead of TNR to highlight the increased use of vaccination in this process.

Why TNR and TNVR Work

It stabilizes and eventually reduces colonies. Female cats reach sexual maturity as early as four to six months old, with a gestation period of about nine weeks and an average of two to six kittens per litter. A cat can go into heat several times per breeding season, and there's a high likelihood she will get pregnant each time.⁶⁵ The cycle then continues with each unsterilized female kitten. Thus, the size of cat colonies can quickly increase exponentially, causing multiple problems from a strain on resources to increased public health concerns.

Sterilization is a humane way of reducing the size of cat colonies over time. In contrast, lethal removal creates a "vacuum effect," documented worldwide in many species. Untrapped cats continue to breed, and new cats move into the newly available territory.⁶⁶

Photo by Sloan Cunningham, FENM



Before being returned to their neighborhoods, TNR cats are humanely ear tipped to show they've been vaccinated and fixed.

Photo by Liz Wolf



Unsocialized, sterilized felines can often find placement as barn cats, providing nontoxic rodent control. Left: Edgewood Animal Shelter's cattery

It reduces nuisance behaviors.

Unsterilized cats often behave in ways that annoy nearby human communities, such as yowling, fighting, and spraying. Sterilization reduces these hormonally driven behaviors.

It improves health. Sterilization reduces the risk of certain cancers and other infections in the cats themselves, especially when done at a young age.⁶⁷ When vaccination against diseases such as rabies is also included, this helps protect not only the cat but also the wider community of wildlife and humans, providing public health benefits that extend beyond the cat or colony.

It saves lives. Feral and community cats are often not socialized well enough to

humans to make them adoptable from the shelter; therefore, many of them are euthanized. Allowing a cat to return safely to the outdoor home it knows gives a chance at life to that cat as well as to the other animals who would be turned away from the shelter due to overcapacity.

TNR / TNVR Concerns

Some people are skeptical of TNR/TNVR. Some consider the return of the cat to its outdoor location as abandonment and not doing enough to help the animal. While animal welfare professionals always try to reunite animals with owners, they can do so only if the cat is identifiable through a collar tag or microchip.

There is also a low return-to-owner rate for cats; owners are more likely to search for and find a lost cat in their area, instead of looking at a local shelter. In addition, 30 percent of U.S. households feed community cats.⁶⁸ The TNR/TNVR process is caring for the cat, not abandoning it.

Another prominent concern about TNR/TNVR focuses on wildlife. Everybody knows that cats kill birds, but this is not exclusively a cat activity. Birds have many natural predators, such as raccoons and snakes, but the primary cause of wildlife disruption is negative human activity, such as habitat destruction and climate change. Looked at another way, TNR/TNVR can be considered positive human activity that supports the natural reduction in the number of cats, letting the ecosystem function as designed.⁶⁹

Felines & Friends New Mexico

A leader in TNR and feline welfare, FFNM is a rescue organization that has transformed the lives of 7,000 homeless cats and kittens since its founding in 2002. Operating primarily in Santa Fe, the organization specializes in offering a second chance to vulnerable, abandoned, stray, and special-needs felines.

Led by Executive Director Bobbi Heller, the group collaborates closely with regional shelter partners to accept cats requiring medical rehabilitation, behavioral socialization, or just extra time to adjust. Beyond standard intake, the organization combats pet overpopulation through its proactive TNR initiatives for community cat colonies and by providing low-cost



Photo by Española Humane

Operation Meow, a collaborative supply drive for community cat caretakers, marches in the 2025 Santa Fe Children's Parade.

spay/neuter services for local pet owners. Through its mobile adoption events, partner habitats at local pet stores, and dedicated foster home networks, the rescue ensures every cat receives medical testing, microchipping, and vaccinations. FFNM relies on local volunteers to help adoptable felines transition from the streets into permanent families.

FFNM is funded by community donations, grants, and its pet-boarding business, Santa Fe Cats. Another community resource is the weekly "Pet Chat" podcast hosted by Bobbi Heller and Murad Kirdar, Community Engagement Director at Española Humane.⁷⁰

Operation Meow

Three leading animal welfare organizations joined forces in 2025 to launch Operation Meow, a collaborative mission supporting the volunteers who care for community cat colonies, many paying out of their own pocket for food and supplies. Española Humane, Santa Fe Animal Shelter, and Felines & Friends New Mexico launched the effort to ease that burden by collecting and distributing donated cat food directly to the people on the frontlines of care.

"Community cats are part of the fabric of Northern New Mexico, and the people who care for them are everyday heroes," the organizers explain. "Through Operation Meow, we can support both the cats and their caretakers with the resources they need."

Mental Health in Sheltering

The emotional burden of shelter work is a feature of the profession, not a bug. Staff and volunteers are routinely exposed to animal neglect, cruelty, injury, disease, and death while also navigating the distress of people who have lost pets, cannot afford care, or are surrendering animals under difficult circumstances. Repeated exposure creates compassion fatigue, burnout, empathic strain, and moral injury, contributing to high turnover and organizational instability.

Stakeholders emphasized that this psychological toll remains underrecognized, even though shelter workers perform essential functions for animal welfare, public health, and community safety. Their work sits at the intersection of caregiving and crisis response, yet many receive little formal support for stress, trauma, or grief.

The work combines intimate care with repeated exposure to suffering. In the same day, staff may bottle-feed neonates, reunite lost pets with families, and confront cruelty cases, medical crises, or euthanasia decisions. This constant cycling between hope and loss is emotionally destabilizing, especially where staffing shortages leave little time to process these experiences.

One of the deepest stressors is the “caring-killing paradox.” Workers drawn to the field to protect animals may also be required to participate in euthanasia or witness decline they cannot prevent. That conflict can produce moral injury when decisions are shaped by overcrowding, illness, or systemic failures outside the worker’s control.

Public criticism intensifies the problem, especially when social media reduces complex welfare decisions to accusations of cruelty or incompetence.

4. Resource Limitations

Because staffing problems are inseparable from funding, nearly every conversation about operations turned to another finding: the region’s sheltering system is constrained by chronic resource limitations. These appear not only in annual budgets but also in the absence of reliable planning horizons. Shelters cannot build sustainable staffing models, preventive programs, or capital improvements when funding is unstable and contract terms are inadequate. The result is a system that remains reactive when it needs to become strategic.

Inadequate, Unpredictable Funding

Chronic underinvestment from government sources emerged as a key structural finding. Across the region, shelters rely heavily on donors, foundations, and fundraising to support services communities expect. In effect, private philanthropy subsidizes core animal care and control services, making humane sheltering fragile because donations fluctuate, grants end, and fundraising requires staff time and expertise.

The Animal Welfare Program Fund, created by the New Mexico State Legislature in 2025, is one example of a success in recent years. However, the one-time appropriation of \$5 million was fully awarded by July 31, 2026, and is deeply inadequate to cover the current and ongoing needs of New Mexico’s animal care and control system.

Interviewees repeatedly stressed that prevention is more cost-effective than downstream sheltering. Spay/neuter access, pet retention support, owner-directed rehoming tools, return-to-owner efforts, and other diversion strategies can reduce intake before a kennel is needed. Once an animal enters the sheltering system, costs multiply through housing, feeding, cleaning, vaccination, treatment, and more.

Available examples illustrate the scale of those costs. Santa Fe Animal Shelter reports spending about \$65 per day on each animal in its care; at an average 35-day length of stay, that’s \$2,275—for one dog. Stray Hearts has posted a public operating budget narrative showing annual expenses exceeding \$1 million. These figures are not directly interchangeable, but they point to the same reality: humane sheltering is expensive, and the true cost is often underestimated.

Those costs also highlight the need for consistent data collection and public reporting. Without standardized measures for intake, length of stay, outcome type, veterinary expense, diversion success, and cost per animal, communities cannot calculate true needs or evaluate which interventions produce the greatest impact. Better data would not close funding gaps by itself, but it would make those gaps harder to ignore and easier to address responsibly.

At a policy level, humane sheltering should be understood as a public health and safety function. Communities expect protection from roaming animals, cruelty, disease transmission, and unsafe conditions. They also expect humane treatment of the animals themselves. Consequently, the State of New Mexico and local governments must treat sheltering and animal control as essential infrastructure rather than optional charitable work.

Insufficient Contracts

A closely related problem is the structure of shelter/government contracts. Stakeholders described a widespread misunderstanding of what it costs to operate an animal shelter humanely, especially an open-admission shelter or effective animal control program. In many jurisdictions, contracts between governments and nonprofit providers underprice the work, forcing nonprofits to make up the difference through donations and grants.

Shelter contract expert Julianna Tetlow observes that government staff and local officials are “consistently and deeply surprised” by the cost of running a high-live-outcome shelter or effective animal control program.⁶³ One common mistake is tying compensation too closely to a single variable, such as intake count. That model ignores fixed costs such as staffing, facilities, vehicles, utilities, disease control, and readiness, and it can penalize shelters for prevention programs that reduce intake. Shelters and animal control agencies should be compensated for the full scope of work they perform.

This is why contract negotiation skill matters. Shelters need to understand what services a municipality is legally required to provide, how to calculate actual costs, and how to communicate that value to policymakers. Without that shared understanding, animal services are vulnerable to being treated as

Photo by Heidi Baxter/APNM



“Animal welfare organizations are starting to get serious about their worth—about who actually needs whom,” says Juliana Tetlow, a contract negotiation expert. “Know what services your jurisdiction is mandated to provide.”

an easy target when budgets tighten, even though underfunding pushes costs and risks elsewhere.

More broadly, the findings point to a lack of local and state understanding of the real cost of animal care services. When municipal fees paid to nonprofit operators do not cover actual operating expenses, the burden of humane care shifts onto organizations that must simultaneously shelter animals and fundraise to survive. That is inefficient, unstable, and incompatible with long-term planning.

New Mexico therefore needs a more reliable and adequate stream of public funding for shelter infrastructure, operations, and targeted prevention programs. The state’s toughest challenges, including overpopulation, weak access to spay/neuter services, rural service deserts, and strain on tribal and county systems, cannot be addressed through sporadic appropriations alone. A steadier funding model, insulated as much as possible from annual political fluctuations, would allow communities to build capacity instead of moving from crisis to crisis.

These findings point toward clear recommendations. If the system’s failures are structural, the response must also be structural: more reliable public investment, modernized facilities, stronger contracts, better data, expanded prevention services, and workforce supports that recognize shelter labor as essential public-interest work.

Best Practices in Sheltering

Modern animal sheltering starts with a simple premise: most animals belong in homes, not in kennels. Even a well-run shelter is rarely an ideal long-term environment. Strong shelter systems prevent unnecessary intake, reunite lost pets quickly, and reserve shelter care for animals with no better option. Increasingly, shelters also provide pet-supportive services and resources to their communities.

The Five Freedoms

The Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare remain a crucial baseline for shelter care. They are: freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury, and disease; freedom from fear and distress; and freedom to express normal behavior. These make clear that humane sheltering is not limited to food, water, and medical treatment, but also includes emotional well-being.

Shelter Operations

When sheltering is necessary, capacity for care, not kennel count, must define how many animals a facility can responsibly hold. The University of California–Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program’s Capacity for Care framework links intake and length of stay to staffing, housing, medical resources, and outcomes. Shelters that stay within that balance reduce illness, shorten stays, and protect staff as well as animals.

Housing and Enrichment

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians’ 2022 Guidelines set minimum expectations for humane housing and daily care. Adult cats need adequate space, dogs need housing suited to their size, and animals should have separation between resting and elimination areas whenever possible. Elevated resting platforms, sanitation, disease control, and daily enrichment are not extras; they are core welfare needs. Facilities may not be able to meet every standard immediately, but minimum standards should guide budgeting, facility planning, and daily operations.

Targeted Spay/Neuter

Adoption and transfer alone cannot solve overcrowding. High-quality, high-volume spay/neuter (HQHVSN) targeted to the animals and zip codes

that generate the most intake can reduce pressure over time. It is not a stand-alone solution, but paired with prevention and placement programs, it remains central to stable, pet-supportive communities.

Community Safety Nets

Many families surrender pets because they lack food, veterinary care, housing flexibility, or temporary support. Pet food pantries, vaccination and wellness clinics, behavior help, crisis foster, microchips and tags, rehoming support, and pet-inclusive housing assistance keep animals in homes at far lower cost than impoundment while avoiding trauma for people and pets.

Adoption and Live Outcomes

Shelters become more effective when they act as bond-makers rather than gatekeepers. Humane World for Animals’ Adopters Welcome model frames prospective adopters as partners, not as applicants to be screened. Conversation-based adoption, practical matching, same-day placement when appropriate, foster-to-adopt paths, field return-to-owner, working-cat placement, and transfer partnerships all improve live outcomes. No single tool is enough, but together they help crowded shelters move animals safely and humanely toward homes.

Data and Technology

Every shelter should use modern shelter-management software rather than paper records. Reliable data supports daily decisions, grant applications, public accountability, and policy advocacy. Shelter Animals Count and the Shelter Pet Data Alliance provide national benchmarking tools that help organizations compare intake, outcomes, and trends across communities.

Leadership and Public Policy

Best practices require public investment and leadership. In high-intake states such as New Mexico, shelter directors and advocates must build relationships with city councils, county leaders, and legislators before crises erupt. Sustainable funding, modern ordinances, responsible breeding regulation, veterinary access, and prevention programs are what allow communities to meet their obligations to animals and residents alike.

Two Large Shelters' Intake Diversion Strategies

CASE STUDIES

One in three pets goes missing in their lifetime.⁷¹ Nationwide, shelters know that most stray dogs and cats are picked up less than a mile from their home. If owned, these animals are reunited at a higher rate if *not* taken to the local shelter.

Here are two municipalities, one in Texas and one in New Mexico, that are reducing high stray numbers with smart solutions.

Dallas's Loose Dogs

After a fatal dog-mauling incident in 2015, Dallas Animal Services (DAS) confronted the city's widespread loose dog problem with a new strategy, led by then-director Ed Jamison. Next, under Director Paul Ramon, DAS hired a consulting firm, which estimated 10,000 owned and unowned dogs were loose across Dallas.

Initially, the city-run agency relied on traditional enforcement. Field service officers picked up as many as 1,000 dogs each month and cited owners. However, this approach produced only moderate results, particularly for low-income residents unable to pay fines.

DAS then shifted to a community-centered model focused on education, support, and intake diversion. "Whatever the call, my officers try to return the dog to the owner," explains Daniel Alvarado, Assistant General Manager of Field.⁷²

Officers canvass neighbors and print "lost pet" flyers right from their vehicles. When owners can't be found, DAS's robust online pet reunification tools are available.

DAS also created a community engagement team that maps high-need areas and surveys residents door to door. Officers help owners with pet food, rental fees, tethering compliance, spay/neuter services, and other resources through partnerships with local organizations to keep pets at home with their families.

Dallas Animal Services collects data for each of the city's eight districts, facilitating targeted budget requests and services. Community meetings are offered in English and Spanish.



Albuquerque's Microchip Scanners

Even a small investment in prevention can have a big impact. Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department (AWD) is an open admission, municipal shelter system serving New Mexico's largest city. In 2023, AWD's intake of 23,000 animals rivaled that of Dallas, even though Albuquerque's population (560,000) is less than half that of Texas's third-largest city. As in other municipalities, strays represent the largest percentage of AWD intakes.

In August of 2023 AWD launched a pet reunification program, installing microchip scanners in 34 partner locations around the city: 5 businesses, 7 Police Dept. substations, and 22 Fire Dept. stations. Good Samaritan finders take the lost and stray animals to get scanned and hopefully reunited with their owner, preventing shelter intake.

With just a \$10,000 investment in microchip scanners, set-up materials, and promotion, AWD's program has achieved significant impact. From its start through 2025, of the 639 animals brought in for scanning, 426 had microchips (66 percent) and 158 (nearly 25 percent) were reunited.⁷³

AWD also provides walk-in microchipping services (free to seniors and qualifying families), engraved pet ID tags at outreach events, and "lost and found" social media posts featuring that day's stray intakes.

"Since 2023, intake dropped by nearly 8,200 animals due to effective programs such as TNR for cats,⁷⁴ spay/neuter blitzes, and microchip scanning."

—Carolyn Ortega,
Director,
Albuquerque Animal
Welfare Department

Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to establish a coherent statewide framework that responds to stakeholder-identified needs previously described in this section. Collectively, these reforms aim to shift New Mexico toward a proactive and coordinated system that prioritizes prevention of pet overpopulation, reduction of shelter intake and euthanasia, and consistent humane treatment of companion animals across all contexts.

State-Level Recommendations

Legislative Reform

1. Establish comprehensive oversight of companion animal welfare and management within state government.

- a. Amend the Animal Sheltering Act to strengthen humane care standards and oversight for animal shelters and other appropriate facilities, and to provide effective enforcement mechanisms for neglect, cruelty, and hoarding cases.
- b. Expand animal welfare regulation to include private rescues and sanctuaries, as well as commercial entities and individuals that breed, sell, board, train, transport, or otherwise handle companion animals in ways that affect animal welfare and shelter system outcomes.
- c. Amend Chapter 22 NMSA to establish humane education within public school curricula, with an emphasis on early childhood education and responsible animal care.

2. Improve data collection and analysis across the animal sheltering and animal services sectors.

- a. Require a designated state agency to collect and report meaningful animal sheltering metrics, adjusted for population served, including live release rates, length of stay, return-to-owner rates, transfer efficiency, medical and behavioral recovery rates, community cat management effectiveness, and cost per positive outcome.
- b. Direct the state agency to use these data to calculate the true costs of animal care and control, improve shelter contracting practices, and inform policy solutions to statewide challenges.
- c. Identify and collect data that support integration of human and animal services within major policy areas, including housing, workforce development, education, public safety, and emergency preparedness.

3. Improve animal shelter access to veterinary providers and services.

- a. Amend the Veterinary Medical Loan Repayment Act to expand loan repayment incentives for veterinarians serving animal shelters and rural communities.
- b. Develop state agency initiatives and partnerships with regional veterinary schools and veterinary technician programs to recruit veterinary students, interns, technicians, and graduates to work in New Mexico shelters and underserved areas.
- c. Amend the Veterinary Practice Act to authorize and facilitate telemedicine in animal shelter settings.

Animal Shelter Capacity and Prevention Investments

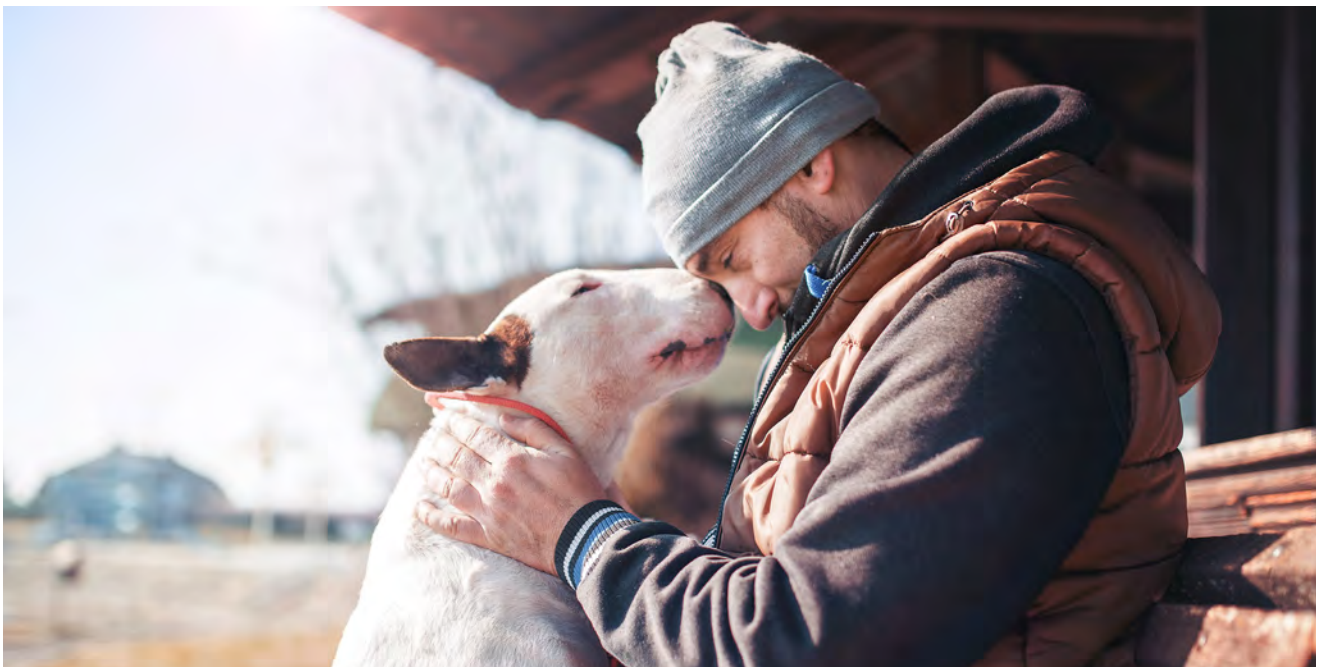
4. Expand and strengthen shelter infrastructure and standard enforcement.

- a. Increase and sustain public investment in shelter infrastructure, including recurring appropriations to the Animal Welfare Program Fund.
- b. Ensure consistent funding for animal shelter inspections conducted by the New Mexico Board of Veterinary Medicine to support compliance with minimum facility and animal care standards.

5. Prioritize community-based outreach and prevention programs.

- a. Support community-based safety net services that help keep animals in their homes, including pet food pantries, vaccination and wellness clinics, behavior support, crisis foster care, free microchipping and identification tags, post-adoption support, rehoming assistance, and emergency preparedness training.
- b. Establish recurring public investment in free and low-cost spay/neuter services, trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR) programs, and veterinary training and clinics that provide high-quality, high-volume spay/neuter services (HQHVSN), including through the Affordable Spay/Neuter Assistance Program.
- c. Implement a statewide multi-channel community campaign promoting responsible companion animal care and ownership.

Photo by People & Animals in Community Together (PACT)





Shelter technician Alexandra Archuleta cares for a cat at Española Humane. The nonprofit is one of the few New Mexico shelters that contracts with tribal as well as non-tribal local governments.

Local-Level Recommendations

Local Sheltering Infrastructure and Programs

1. Upgrade and expand regional shelter infrastructure using animal resource center design models.

- a. Pursue state Capital Outlay funding and other funding opportunities to repair and renovate existing facilities, improve operations, reduce intake and euthanasia, and support compliance with minimum sheltering standards.
- b. Develop new shelter capacity in underserved areas using modern shelter design best practices, including multijurisdictional and tribal–non-tribal partnerships where appropriate.

2. Reduce dog and cat populations to align with the infrastructure’s and community’s capacity of care.

- a. Implement targeted spay/neuter initiatives in high-intake and high-stray areas, low-resource communities, community cat populations, and for breeds disproportionately represented in shelter populations.
- b. Enforce compliance with breeding permit requirements and related local ordinances.
- c. Expand local safety net services and pet retention programs that help families keep animals in their homes and reduce shelter intake.

Workforce Development

3. Grow and strengthen the local animal services and veterinary workforces.

- a. Support the development of a statewide professional association for New Mexico animal shelter professionals and leaders.
- b. Invest in workforce training, competitive compensation, employee benefits, and professional development opportunities.
- c. Promote careers in animal sheltering, animal care, behavior training, humane education, and related professions, particularly within underserved and underrepresented communities.
- d. Facilitate access to high-quality, high-volume spay/neuter (HQHVSN) training opportunities for veterinarians and veterinary technicians.



"I love being able to wake up and work with animals every day," says Officer Matthew McKale, an animal control officer with Santa Clara Pueblo Tribal Police. "This opportunity allows me to do what I am passionate about in my community. I want to continue to spread animal love and safety awareness."

Animal Control

Introduction

Evolving from the early, gritty days of “dogcatchers,” field service officers today perform a range of critical functions: public safety protection, code enforcement, cruelty investigation, community education, and disaster response. Without these services, communities are less safe. Yet large swaths of the north central region have sparse to no animal control coverage.

“Animal control officers protect public health, ensure humane standards, and strengthen community safety.”

—**Jerrica Owen**, CEO,
National Animal Care
and Control Association

Photo by Heidi Baxter/APNM



Los Alamos County animal shelter and animal control function together under the Police Department. Above: Student Intern Serenity Perez, Animal Control Supervisor Theresa Phelan, Senior Animal Control Officer Miki Moreno, and Shelter Manager Paul Sena.

History of Animal Control

The first efforts to establish animal laws and animal pounds in the United States date back to the colonial era.

Livestock Protection

Early communities were heavily dependent on livestock, and roaming dogs were viewed as direct threats to agriculture and public order. Early ordinances focused on controlling animals running at large and protecting property. Examples included laws requiring restraint of dogs during certain hours and authorizing the removal or killing of dogs found roaming without identification.

As towns grew into cities through the 19th century, animal control also became a matter of public health and public safety. Stray dogs and unmanaged animals created bite risks, nuisance conditions, and sanitation concerns in dense urban environments. Municipalities increasingly formalized animal impoundment through public pounds and designated “dogcatcher” roles, which were often linked, directly or indirectly, to local government health and safety functions.

Rabies Prevention

During this same period, rabies prevention and control became a core driver of animal control practice. Rabies is a viral zoonotic disease that attacks the nervous system. Historically, once symptoms appeared rabies was 100 percent fatal. Intense community fear of rabies outbreaks led many jurisdictions to adopt stronger dog licensing and confinement requirements, establish bite-response procedures, and enforce quarantine or observation protocols for animals suspected of exposure.

Over time, routine animal control work in many areas incorporated rabies-related responsibilities such as bite investigations, coordination with public health partners, enforcement of vaccination requirements, and oversight of quarantine and release processes.

In the 20th century, animal control continued



Photo from Vintage Images, Alamy

North Dakota dogcatchers round up 13 dogs with their horse-drawn wagon, 1909. Complaints about dogs running at large remains one of the most common calls to rural, urban, and tribal animal field services.



Photo from Circa Images, Alamy

Two dogcatchers use a pole net and their bare hands to capture a dog in Washington D.C., 1924. Notice the workers' lack of protective gear.

shifting toward a more professionalized public service that balances enforcement with community-based solutions. As veterinary science, vaccination access, and sheltering practices expanded, many communities moved from purely punitive or removal-based approaches to more structured animal services systems.

Today, animal control remains rooted in public health and community safety, including rabies risk reduction, while also serving as a frontline function for animal welfare, ordinance enforcement, and disaster-related support.

Animal Control Today

Animal control has evolved into a professional public service role with trained personnel responsible for protecting public health, public safety, animal welfare, and community quality of life. While many people still associate animal control officers (ACOs) primarily with picking up strays, modern animal control work is broader: it combines safe animal handling, ordinance enforcement, investigations, documentation, interagency coordination, and public-facing problem-solving.

Common Service Call Drivers

Animal control functions are often influenced by two practical drivers that show up repeatedly in service calls, according to the first national report on field services data.⁷⁵ These drivers are access to veterinary care and community education about responsible pet ownership.

When veterinary care is difficult to access or afford, animals are more likely to be sick, injured, unvaccinated, or untreated. These conditions can increase calls for service and complicate field outcomes.

When education and support are limited, agencies spend substantial time addressing preventable issues such as roaming, poor containment, lack of identification, and unmanaged reproduction.

In practice, officers frequently find themselves working the hardest cases—such as repeat neglect situations, chronic noncompliance, and complex household dynamics—while having fewer opportunities to proactively reach the larger share of residents who want to do right by their animals but may lack resources or knowledge.

These pressures are compounded by cases where the number of animals grows over time (for example, following a death or hardship in a household), creating significant resource strain and contributing to compassion fatigue for responders.

Field Services Models

Many jurisdictions are shifting toward field service models that emphasize outcomes rather than intake volume. This approach prioritizes keeping



Reflecting the professionalization of animal control, the first national report was published in 2025, produced by Shelter Animals Count and the National Animal Care & Control Association.



Animal control has evolved to focus on community services alongside enforcement. Many departments now refer to ACOs as *animal protection officers*, *animal services officers*, *field officers*, or *humane officers*.

pets safely in their homes when possible, using progressive enforcement and practical support to achieve compliance, and reserving impoundment for cases involving immediate risk, legal requirements, or repeated noncompliance. In practice, this can include return-to-owner in the field, scheduled rechecks, targeted enforcement in high-call areas, and coordination with shelters and rescues to reduce unnecessary intake while improving public satisfaction and officer safety.

Professional Representation

ACOs and law enforcement officers performing animal-related functions have representation at the national level. The National Animal Care & Control Association (NACA) was formed in 1978 to provide resources, standardized training, and support for animal care and control professionals across the U.S. NACA works to educate the public; advocate for proper training, equitable salaries, and recognition; and provide support and networking opportunities for the nation's 32 state ACO associations.⁷⁶ The New Mexico Animal Control Association disbanded in 2018.

What Animal Control Officers Do

Although the profession has existed since the mid-19th century, the animal control officer (ACO) role is still widely misunderstood. Far from the “dogcatcher” stereotype of earlier times, today’s ACO serves a frontline public safety and public health function while also acting as a practical bridge between local government, animal services systems, and the general community. ACOs often work long hours, in dangerous situations, in inclement weather, and under resource constraints—while being expected to make sound, humane decisions in the field and produce documentation that can stand up in court.

ACOs may work within a city, county, or tribal government, or they may be housed within an animal shelter operating under a government contract. Regardless of structure, the work requires specialized training, consistent policies, and equipment that supports both humane handling and officer safety. Functions typically fall into five categories.

Public Safety

Protecting public safety and public health are key components of the job. ACOs respond to calls about animals that pose a threat to public safety, such as aggressive dogs or wildlife found in urban areas. Knowing how to handle these situations requires specialized training and equipment (e.g., catch poles, tranquilizers) as well as the ability to walk into the unknown and figure out a successful outcome.

In cases of wildlife in urban areas, sometimes ACOs will relocate or remove the animal themselves (live or dead), but if they can’t, having good working relationships with local wildlife agencies is important. ACOs also investigate animal bites and enforce quarantine for animals suspected of carrying rabies.

Code and Law Enforcement

ACOs enforce a wide range of state laws and local ordinances related to animals. This can include inspections, responding to nuisance complaints (such as noise and waste), and addressing ongoing compliance issues through progressive enforcement. They also investigate animal neglect, cruelty, hoarding, abandonment, and intentional acts of abuse, and may conduct follow-up checks tied to veterinary



Photo by Bernalillo County Sheriff's Office

ACOs and law enforcement officers often accompany each other on calls. Above: Sheriff's deputies and ACOs respond to an animal hoarding situation in a rural community.

recommendations or court orders. These cases often require detailed documentation, evidence handling, and coordination with prosecutors, judges, and law enforcement, especially when animals must be held as evidence or when a case involves repeated offenders.

Public Education and Service

ACOs provide public education and outreach on humane pet care and responsible ownership. While capturing stray or loose animals remains part of the job, modern practice also emphasizes reunification and prevention—reducing unnecessary shelter intake by returning pets to owners when safe and feasible, encouraging identification (including microchipping), and helping residents understand basic containment and care expectations.

ACOs also function as problem-solvers who help residents navigate real-life barriers. That can include providing food, supplies, or referrals; helping owners in crisis (including eviction, incarceration, or sudden hardship); and assisting pet owners experiencing homelessness. Some agencies also support practical, safety-focused interventions such as repairs or temporary solutions to reduce roaming and repeat calls (for example, addressing containment/fencing issues where programs and resources allow).

More and more, ACOs are providing community-

based services to address neighborhood issues, help the elderly care for their pets, and even gather data that can be used for policy making.⁷⁷

Animal Protection

Much of the work described above protects animals directly or indirectly, even when actions are focused on community safety. In addition, ACOs respond to sick or injured animals and to animals that are lost, stray, or in danger. Depending on the jurisdiction, they may also manage welfare cases involving wildlife, exotic animals, and farmed animals, and coordinate transport to appropriate receiving partners.

Animal protection work commonly includes managing community cat issues, including supporting programs such as trap-neuter-return (TNR; see case study on page 50) and shelter-neuter-return (SNR) where those models are authorized and operational. Officers may also trap individual loose dogs or animals when needed to achieve a safe outcome.

Disaster Response

ACOs play a critical role during emergencies and disasters. They may support evacuations, animal rescue operations, temporary sheltering and transport logistics, and reunification during response and recovery. During incidents, animal operations can directly affect human outcomes: when residents cannot evacuate with animals or lack the ability to transport them safely, having trained animal field services improves compliance and reduces risk for households, responders, and the broader community.

Operational Supports

Because the ACO role includes enforcement, emergency response, public interaction, and animal handling, agencies must support officers accordingly. A modern animal control program functions best when officers have consistent training, adequate staffing, and the basic tools needed to do the job safely and effectively. This includes humane handling equipment, reliable vehicles, personal safety equipment, and operational tools that help reunite pets with owners (e.g., microchip scanners). Agencies should also review compensation and career pathways to recruit and retain officers for this complex work.

Animal Control Duties

An ACO's broad range of responsibilities can include:

- Bite response and rabies risk investigations, including quarantine/observation processes when indicated and coordination with public health partners
- Cruelty and neglect investigations, including case documentation and referrals for prosecution when appropriate
- Dangerous dog and aggressive animal cases, including enforcement actions, compliance checks, and risk mitigation
- Stray animal calls and field response, including reunification and return-to-owner strategies when feasible
- Nuisance complaints (roaming animals, barking, property impacts) and progressive enforcement to achieve compliance
- Licensing and vaccination compliance enforcement where ordinances require it
- Community education and prevention, including responsible ownership messaging and referral to available services
- Disaster support, including evacuation-related animal response, temporary sheltering coordination, and reunification support during incidents
- Court preparation and testimony support, including evidence management and case coordination with prosecutors
- Coordination with shelters, rescues, veterinarians, and partner agencies to ensure safe outcomes and reduce system strain

“Serving animals does triple duty: it saves a family from violence, it saves the animal’s life, and it promotes community well-being.”

—Isaac Baca,
Haven House
Board Treasurer

While the human-animal bond describes the comfort, joy, and companionship people and animals enjoy from each other, abusers often exploit this deep connection to manipulate, coerce, or control an intimate partner or family member. (See “The Link,” page 21.)

Animal abuse is a common element in domestic violence (DV).⁷⁸ Animal control officers frequently accompany law enforcement on DV calls.

DV and Companion Animals

Consider these statistics:⁷⁹

- 89% of women who had companion animals during an abusive relationship reported their animals were threatened, harmed, or killed by their abusive partner.
- 97% of respondents said that keeping their animal with them is an important factor in deciding whether or not to seek shelter from domestic violence.
- 91% of respondents said their animals’ emotional support and physical protection are significant to their ability to survive and heal.
- 50% said they would not consider shelter for themselves if they had to leave their animals behind.

“Concern for the safety of these pets is warranted,” states family violence expert Andrew M. Campbell. “When a domestic abuser threatens violence against a pet, they almost always carry it out.”⁸⁰

Also, abusers who target animals are more likely to seriously harm their human victims (e.g., strangulation, burning, murder). In short, animal abusers are more dangerous abusers. Of note, households experiencing domestic violence are more likely to have pets than non-DV homes.

Despite these known dangers, only 17 percent of the country’s DV shelters accept pets.⁸¹ New Mexico is ahead of the curve: 50 percent of the state’s 30+ DV shelters offer co-sheltering or some pet-friendly services, but there’s still work to do.⁸²

Haven House DV Co-shelter

Haven House is Sandoval County’s only domestic violence shelter. This large county, with a diverse population of about 160,000 people, encompasses 12 tribal jurisdictions, the City of Rio Rancho, the Town of Bernalillo, and several other municipalities. Like the rest of the U.S., the majority of Sandoval County households have companion animals.

Nearly 10 years ago, Haven House (HH) began adapting their facility to cohouse survivors with their *comfort animals*, as staff refer to the variety of pets who accompany HH clients. So far, in addition to dogs and cats these have included birds, lizards, hamsters, tarantulas, scorpions, and a flying squirrel.

HH has eight separate, homey rooms, each sleeping two to four family members with its own restroom, phone, TV, microwave, and fridge. Pets stay right in the room with their humans.

After Estella Weitz joined HH as executive director in 2020, she saw the need for pet services increase. HH served 274 individuals in shelter in 2024, but demand for services exceeded capacity by nearly 30 percent. Of the 116 unmet shelter needs, about half involved companion animals. Those callers were referred to other shelters, most unequipped to take in animals.

“We get calls from all over New Mexico because survivors are looking for shelter that accepts pets,” Weitz explains. “We knew we had to build capacity.”



Program Manager Denisa Nastacio, Executive Director Estella Weitz, and Treasurer Isaac Baca with kennels for clients' dogs. Haven House gets calls from across New Mexico from survivors looking for a domestic violence co-shelter.

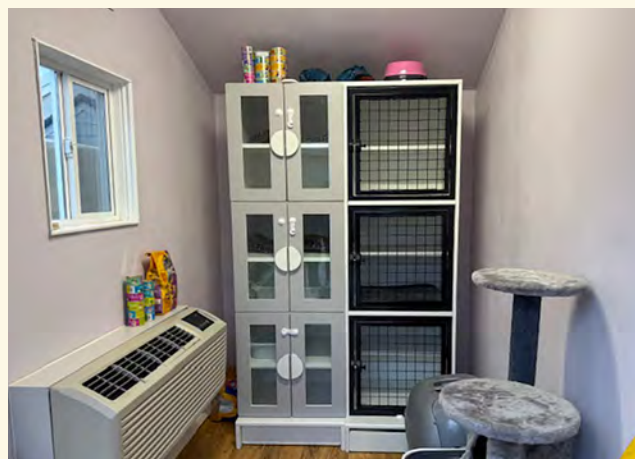
Leadership Sandoval

Leadership Sandoval (LS) answered the call for help. Sponsored by the Rio Rancho Chamber of Commerce, this 10-month program develops local leaders who improve their community through service. Each LS class chooses a nonprofit project to take on. The 2024 class chose HH's co-sheltering initiative, naming it "For Pet's Sake."

The 12-person team devoted six months of Saturdays to transform an undeveloped patch of land on site into a welcoming pet area shaded by a mature cottonwood. They refurbished an insulated shed to house cats, built a quarantine area for dogs, installed six outdoor kennels, created dog runs and a play yard, and enclosed it all in gated fencing.

No one on the team had construction experience, but they figured out how to work with yards of chain link and sloping ground. "Just picking up a sledgehammer was the way to start," says LS team member Isaac Baca, now HH's board treasurer. "If you have the will, you'll find a way."

The team also did their own fundraising. Partnering with M'tucci's Restaurant and writing grants, they raised not only \$12,000 but also awareness. "Animals make domestic violence more relatable," says Baca. "People resonated with helping pets. It made sense to them. How could you not help?"



Haven House converted an old shed to provide a temperature-controlled "condo" for clients' cats.

CARE Program

Becoming a co-shelter or offering pet-inclusive services comes with costs and challenges, Weitz acknowledges, from sanitation and storage for pet supplies to staff training in animal behavior and handling. APNM's Companion Animal Rescue Effort (CARE) assisted Haven House with the transition. (See also Resources.)

CARE has helped 13 other New Mexico DV shelters initiate or improve on their co-sheltering model and, during the last fiscal year alone, assisted 95 survivors with 137 companion animals to exit abusive home environments and find temporary safe haven. The need remains high. Since 2022 CARE program staff have seen a 190 percent increase in calls to the CARE Helpline (505-533-CARE).

A regional approach to DV services is advised because clients with pets often transition from one shelter to another. Reasons include: eluding an abuser who learned their location, moving closer to a support network, job/housing/educational opportunities, and making a fresh start away from the site of their trauma.

"We explain accepting comfort animals as a service for the whole family," says Weitz. Her advice to other DV shelters? "Go all in. It's absolutely worth it."

Findings

In New Mexico, geography and a patchwork of ordinances and program capacity significantly shape how animal control operates.

New Mexico Operational Realities

Rural coverage areas may be large, response times longer, and transport distances to holding or sheltering options substantial. Some communities lack animal control officers entirely or have limited-hours coverage, shifting response responsibilities to other law enforcement or informal community networks. Limited holding capacity, inconsistent access to veterinary services, and the need to coordinate across municipal, county, and tribal boundaries can complicate enforcement and case resolution, especially during cruelty/neglect cases or when animals must be held as evidence.

These conditions increase the importance of regional coordination, clear mutual aid and referral pathways, consistent minimum standards, and education strategies that reduce preventable calls and support safe compliance.

Stakeholders identified five major categories of animal control needs, enumerated in this section. They relate to animal control coverage gaps, dogs running at large, staffing issues, training, and enforcement and prosecution.

1. Animal Control Deserts

New Mexico statute requires all counties and municipalities to provide certain animal control functions. These include the impoundment of rabies-suspect animals and the designation of a part-time or full-time animal control officer deputized to enforce animal control laws.⁸³

Animal Control Programs

Despite these legal requirements, some jurisdictions in the study area still have not established an official animal control program. These “animal control deserts” create predictable gaps in public health and public safety response, and they limit a community’s ability to prevent problems before they escalate. When animal concerns occur, calls are often routed to the local sheriff’s office or to APNM’s Animal Cruelty Helpline (which can refer but not enforce).

Tribal communities face similar challenges when a dedicated animal control program and/or animal control officers are not established. Of the 16 tribes within the study area, at least six do not have an established animal control program and/or animal control officers.

In these settings, animal concerns may be handled through informal processes or by other public safety entities, which can strain tribal agencies, create inconsistency in response, and limit prevention-focused approaches.

Photo by Pueblo of Tesuque



Pueblo of Tesuque is one of at least six Tribes in the region without an animal control program. Tesuque and other Pueblos have supported solutions-oriented legislation, such as the 2025 bill that created the Animal Welfare Program Fund.

Left: Leaders from Tesuque Pueblo, Santa Fe County, and APNM met to discuss animal welfare challenges.

Overall, animal control deserts shift workload to agencies that may not be resourced or structured for animal-related calls, reduce consistency and accountability, and limit the community's ability to prevent avoidable harm to people and animals.

2. Dogs Running at Large

Loose dogs present one of the most common, visible, and disruptive animal-control issues. New Mexico statute requires each county and each municipality "to make provision by ordinance for the seizure and disposition of dogs and cats running at large..."⁸⁴ (In the study area, Mora is the only county lacking an animal ordinance.) Despite this legal requirement, dogs running at large is a persistent, statewide problem.

There are several reasons why dogs might be loose. For owned dogs, approximately one in three will become separated from their owners at some point in their lives, according to Petco Love Lost, an online pet reunification service. Indoor dogs can bolt out an open door. Outdoor escape artists can scale fences or dig under them. Persistently chained dogs—a serious animal welfare and public safety problem in its own right—can break free of their tether. Also, as previously noted, many New Mexico owners simply allow their dogs to roam.

Stakeholders in the study area also noted several known dog-dumping sites, often in rural counties and on tribal lands, where animal owners or finders leave unwanted litters or adult animals. "We can tell when a dog has been left on the Pueblo," says Dawn Hyder, of Jemez Pueblo Environmental Health Dept., "because they sit by the side of road waiting for their person." Additionally, loose dogs are often intact and reproduce, compounding the problem.

National data underscores how central stray/at-large response is to daily animal control operations. Quality-of-life activity makes up the majority of reported field services work, and over half of it is related to loose animals.⁸⁵

Importantly, most stray/at-large situations do *not* require shelter intake when agencies have the authority and tools to resolve calls in the field. This has practical implications for New Mexico communities with limited shelter capacity, limited veterinary access, and large rural response areas, where "catch and impound" is often unrealistic as the default strategy. Intake-diversion tools in the field include owner contact, animal identification, return-to-owner, and problem-solving approaches such as fencing assistance, gate repair, and behavioral training resources.

While loose dog complaints are frequently treated as a nuisance category, they sit on a continuum that can quickly escalate from quality-of-life impacts (fear of walking in a neighborhood, barking/harassment, property damage, traffic hazards) into public safety incidents (aggressive encounters, bites, pack behavior, attacks on pets/livestock, and officer/first-responder safety risks).

Bites and Attacks

Dog bites and serious dog attacks are a significant public safety and public health issue, and they are closely connected to the "dogs running at large" problem. National field services data reinforces this connection: most field work is driven by quality-of-life issues such as roaming-at-large dogs, while public safety calls include aggressive behavior,



"There is not a community in New Mexico that doesn't have a loose dog problem," says Dr. Ralph Zimmerman, Valencia County Shelter Veterinarian and former New Mexico State Veterinarian. Above: From the safety of a vehicle, a researcher and a volunteer with Friends of San Miguel County Animals observe and video feral dogs.

Video by Julie Hart/FSMCA

CASE STUDY

Jemez Pueblo Establishes Animal Control Program

"The animal control program is for the whole community, not just for the animals."

—**Matthew Chinana**, Animal Control Officer, Jemez Pueblo

One of the 16 sovereign tribes in the study area, Jemez Pueblo had longstanding animal issues that mirrored those in other rural New Mexico communities, both tribal and non-tribal.

In 2022, Jemez Pueblo began work on updating their existing dog and cat ordinance. Although at the time it did not have an animal control officer or program, the Pueblo wanted to start enforcing its animal laws. Jemez officials reached out to APNM, and the organization was part of the process of updating the Pueblo's ordinance.

Since then, with the support of tribal leadership, the Pueblo has successfully established an animal control program, procured a vehicle, and is actively enforcing animal laws and educating the community on animal issues.

Staffing

Jemez Pueblo started out with one animal control officer in 2023. Before this, they relied on Sandoval County ACOs, who would respond to animal calls in Jemez Valley, but not in the Pueblo itself.

Arlan Romero, the Pueblo's Environmental

Health Dept. program manager, oversees the animal control program. "Staffing is a challenge," Romero says, stating a need shared by all jurisdictions in the study area. It wasn't until February of 2025 that the Pueblo was able to hire another staff person to assist Matthew Chinana, their only animal control officer. Dawn Hyder, an injury prevention specialist with the Environmental Health Dept., accompanies Officer Chinana on service calls.

Before Hyder's hire, Romero recognized there were officer safety issues in only having one officer respond to calls. Some of these calls involved community members who were upset because Officer Chinana was trying to enforce the Pueblo's dog and cat ordinance. Romero also recognized a need for officer training in de-escalation, which has proven to be very useful. Hyder also pointed out that by having another staff person within their own program, animal control doesn't have to rely on assistance from other departments.

Community Support

At the beginning of the program, there was pushback from the community, but slowly, the community has gradually embraced enforcement of the Pueblo's animal laws. The program now has the support of the tribal administration as well as the community. The program has also been able to coordinate much-needed animal services for the Pueblo, such as spay/neuter and vaccination clinics.

Jemez Pueblo and APNM have continued their partnership. During the 2025 legislative session, Jemez Pueblo helped support the bill creating the Animal Welfare Program Fund, and APNM continues to be a part of their Animal Control Work Group and to provide scholarships for ACO certification.

Photo by Jemez Pueblo



L to R: Arlan Romero, Environmental Health Program Manager; ACO Matthew Chinana; Dawn Hyder, Injury Prevention Specialist; Delila Toya, Administrative Assistant; and Johanna Baca, Injury Prevention Specialist

bites and injuries, dangerous dog designations, and frequent assists to other first responders. This matters because the “upstream” issues that generate repeated loose-dog calls are often the same conditions that increase bite risk over time: poor containment, low identification and licensing compliance, and limited ability to intervene early.

New Mexico Cases

Within New Mexico, severe attacks—including incidents involving multiple dogs—have resulted in fatalities and life-altering injuries. Below are examples from both within and outside the study area.

In 2020, Taos Pueblo authorities investigated whether a community member (reported as a longtime teacher) died as a result of an attack by multiple loose dogs. In 2023, a 64-year-old man in Tucumcari was attacked by a pack of five dogs while walking and was pronounced deceased at the scene. In 2025, a nine-year-old boy in Sunland Park was attacked while walking in his neighborhood and sustained serious injuries requiring hospitalization; reporting indicated the dog was placed under mandatory quarantine and charges were filed.

Stakeholders in the study area have also described other severe incidents, including attacks on public streets and cases where court outcomes did not align with community expectations. These examples underscore the need for consistent policies, documentation, and enforcement pathways.

Animal control officers are frequently the first (and sometimes only) responders for bite cases. Bite and attack response typically requires a combination of scene safety, technical handling skills, and documentation that can support public health action and legal due process.

Jurisdictions without enforceable animal ordinances often have fewer tools to intervene early in roaming and escalating-risk situations. While state cruelty statutes may apply in neglect or cruelty cases, they are not a substitute for local authority to address habitual running-at-large behavior, repeat nuisance issues, and progressive enforcement measures that prevent bites before they occur.

Dangers to Dogs

Loose dogs are not only a risk to people and other animals, they are also at significant risk themselves. When dogs are allowed to roam, they are more likely to be struck by vehicles, injured in fights, attacked by wildlife, exposed to extreme weather, or harmed by measures property owners use to protect livestock and property. In rural areas and in “checkerboard” landscapes where residential properties border ranching or agricultural land, these risks can escalate quickly, often with irreversible outcomes.

A 2025 example illustrates how quickly a routine “let the dog out” situation can become fatal. A Taos County couple found their husky dead in a snare trap set on private property to protect livestock from predators. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish determined the property owner set the trap lawfully.

Zuni, the dog, was beloved to the community, and her death sparked debate about who was ultimately responsible, the guardians who let her roam or the property owner who set the trap.⁸⁶

The case underscores an important reality: local ordinances typically require owners to prevent dogs from running at large. When dogs are not kept on their owner’s property, they are more likely to cross onto neighboring lands and encounter hazards that owners may not anticipate or be able to control.

Dog-on-Dog Aggression

Dangers extend to leashed and confined dogs as well. Stakeholders in the region described situations where loose dogs attacked dogs being walked on leash or otherwise under an owner’s control. These incidents can create substantial veterinary costs and, in some cases, force painful outcomes when owners cannot afford treatment.

Beyond the direct impact on the injured animal, dog-on-dog aggression has a well-documented secondary risk: people are frequently injured when they attempt to stop a dog from attacking another animal, such as a cat or another dog. Dog-on-dog incidents can quickly become human injury events.⁸⁷



Tribes report that roaming dog packs harass their bison herds and kill calves. American buffalo are central to Native history, cultural identity, and food sovereignty.

The InterTribal Buffalo Council, founded in 1991, has 86 member tribes, including 9 within New Mexico: Jicarilla Apache Nation and Taos, Picuris, Ohkay Owingeh, Pojoaque, Nambé, Tesuque, Cochiti, and Sandia Pueblos.

Left: Sandia Pueblo manages a bison herd.

Livestock Predation

Livestock predation is a recurring driver of human–animal conflict in New Mexico and can shape how communities view, manage, and enforce animal control.

Across the state, cattle, bison, llamas, alpaca, sheep, goats, and other animals are raised in landscapes where native predators are present, where weather and terrain can limit supervision, and where animals may be more vulnerable during calving and lambing seasons. When predation occurs, the impacts can include direct economic loss, animal welfare concerns, and increased tension between neighboring land uses (residential, ranching, recreation, and tribal lands).

One dramatic example involved a Mora County fiber producer who had planned to raise alpaca. When a neighbor’s entire alpaca herd was killed by a pack of loose local dogs, the ranch completely changed its business model, opting to raise North American Yak instead. These large, horned bovines, weighing 600 to 1,200 pounds, can better defend themselves against predators and withstand Mora’s 7,400-foot elevation.⁸⁸

Livestock predation is directly relevant to animal control for two reasons.

First, free-roaming dogs can become livestock harassment or predation risks. In rural and semi-rural areas, loose dogs may chase, stress, injure, or kill livestock. Even when dogs do not cause direct kills, harassment can lead to weight loss, injuries,

aborted pregnancies, and animals breaking fences or scattering. These incidents often begin as “dogs running at large” complaints but escalate quickly due to livestock impact.

Second, as seen in the Taos County husky case previously described, landowners may use lawful predator-control measures, including trapping. This increases risk to roaming dogs and can complicate community relationships between ranchers and pet owners.

Preventing dogs from roaming is therefore not only a public safety goal, it is also a dog-safety and conflict-prevention strategy in livestock areas.

Traffic Collisions

Traffic collisions involving animals are a common, high-risk outcome of dogs running at large and other unmanaged animal issues. These incidents pose immediate dangers to motorists, pedestrians, and first responders, often causing severe injuries, fatalities, vehicle damage, and road closures. Beyond the immediate physical and financial impacts, frequent collisions drive ongoing community concern regarding neighborhood safety. In areas with little or no animal control, these incidents persist, requiring significant time and resources for officers to manage. Ultimately, these recurring accidents highlight why animal control is an essential public safety service: without enforced containment laws and active management, unmanaged animals continuously drain municipal time and resources.



New Mexico advocates celebrate the passage of a ban on persistent tethering in Valencia County in 2022. A grace period allowed residents to seek assistance if needed to come into compliance with the new law.

Dog Chaining Is Not the Solution

Some New Mexico law enforcement and public officials may believe the answer to dogs running at large is to chain them. However, research and experience show that persistent tethering creates problems just as serious as allowing dogs to roam. Long-term chaining is widely recognized as both a public safety risk and a form of animal cruelty.⁸⁹

Studies by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Humane Association have found that chained dogs are 2.8 times more likely to bite people than dogs that are not tethered.⁹⁰ A chained dog cannot escape from perceived threats, forcing it into a defensive “fight” response. Over time, isolation, frustration, and lack of social interaction can lead to aggression commonly known as “chain rage.”

Children are especially vulnerable because they may unknowingly enter a dog’s restricted area and fail to recognize warning signs.

Dogs are social animals that thrive on companionship. When confined to the end of a chain for long periods, they suffer from boredom, anxiety, and poor physical health. Many lack adequate exercise, shelter, shade, food, or water and are forced to eat, sleep, and eliminate in the same small space.

Tethers can also become tangled, causing severe injuries or even death. Animal control officers often encounter dogs with embedded collars or chains (see

photo on page 80) so severe that euthanasia is the only humane option.

The humane and effective alternative is responsible containment through secure fencing, outdoor runs, and regular supervision, combined with proper socialization and training. Dogs that are safely confined while remaining connected to their families are less likely to become aggressive and pose fewer risks to neighbors, visitors, utility workers, postal carriers, and law enforcement officers.

The solution to dogs running at large is not chaining them. It is responsible ownership that protects both public safety and animal welfare.

A Humane, Effective Approach

The risks discussed in this section explain why “running at large” provisions are not merely nuisance rules. Humane, effective containment expectations, consistent enforcement, and practical prevention strategies protect community safety and protect dogs from predictable harms. A comprehensive approach typically includes:

- Clear definitions and enforceable standards for humane confinement/containment
- Owner accountability for repeat roaming and nuisance behavior
- Identification and reunification tools (ID tags, microchips, scanning capability)
- Prevention-oriented interventions (education, warnings, compliance checks, and practical containment solutions and assistance)
- Targeted enforcement in chronic problem areas to reduce repeat incidents

Taken together, these measures reduce the likelihood that roaming dogs end up injured, killed, or involved in attacks. They also reduce the broader public safety, animal welfare, and financial strain these incidents place on communities.

Investing in animal control—through better staffing, ordinances, and tools—helps reduce these risks, strengthens public confidence, and ensures greater safety for both people and animals in the community.

CASE STUDY

NMDOG: Outreach, Education, Advocacy

“For every chained dog we took in, I was always aware there were hundreds we would never know about or be able to help.”

—Angela Stell,
Founder and
Director, NMDOG

In 2009, NMDOG began in the back of Angela Stell’s PT Cruiser with a single doghouse, a bale of straw, and a knock on a neighbor’s door to help chained dogs. Founded in 2010 by Stell and her rescue dog JoJo (2003–2016), the organization was created to address the lack of services for chained dogs and canine victims of cruelty across New Mexico.

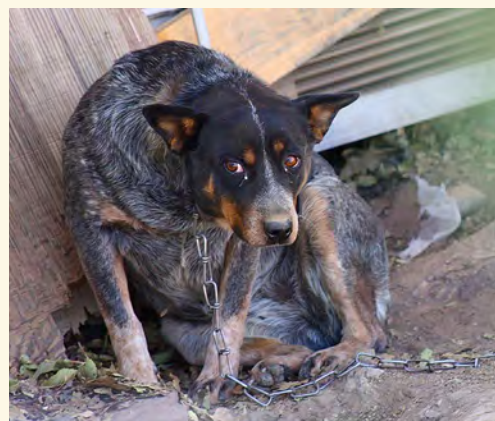
Since then, NMDOG has been on the frontlines of animal welfare in the state, freeing and rehoming hundreds of chained dogs and supporting owners so they can keep their animals humanely.

Stell and the NMDOG volunteer team provide practical resources that immediately improve welfare. These include sturdy, escape-proof fencing so dogs can safely run and play, straw for outdoor animals, spay/neuter funding assistance to reduce unwanted litters, and supplies such as doghouses, food, leashes, ID tags, and toys.

NMDOG and partner stakeholders have also led the passage of anti-chaining laws in 18 jurisdictions, including Gallup, Las Vegas, Raton, Roswell, and San Miguel, Santa Fe, and Valencia counties. They

continue to lobby for statewide anti-chaining legislation. NMDOG also shares its expertise widely. The organization has presented locally, statewide, and nationally on the dangers of chaining, interagency collaboration, best

A few of the hundreds of chains collected over NMDOG’s 16 years of operation.



Photos by NMDOG

NMDOG has rescued over a thousand dogs from life at the end of a chain.

practices in rescue, and safe field handling. Stell was awarded the 2017 Diane Lane Memorial Award by the National Animal Care and Control Association.

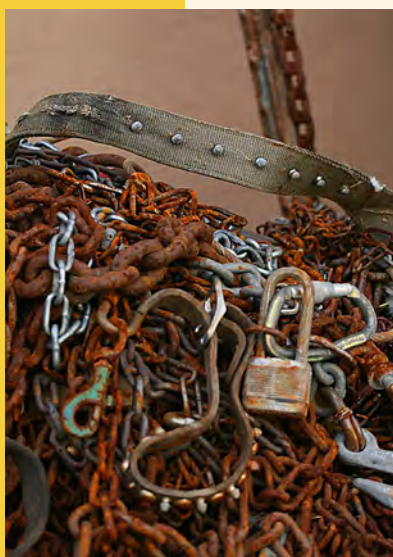
In the past two years, NMDOG has shifted its primary focus from rescue toward outreach, education, and advocacy, aimed at long-term, systemic change.

Outreach helps owners experiencing temporary hardship keep their pets. NMDOG’s Home Sanctuary program offers a lifetime pledge of care to dogs who have had challenges with traditional placement.

Education includes teaching children responsible animal care as well as helping rescues, elected officials, and law enforcement understand best practices and New Mexico animal law.

NMDOG’s advocacy promotes humane rescue standards, strong local animal ordinances, and state oversight of animal services so authorities and providers can be held accountable.

Stell, who was unpaid as the organization’s director until 2024, also champions self-care for animal welfare personnel. “NMDOG depends on me being healthy, physically and mentally,” she says. (See “Mental Health,” page 52.)



3. Staffing Challenges

Animal control programs in the study area identified staffing as their top challenge or in the top three.

Staffing and Resource Limitations

It is not uncommon for an entire county to have only one or two animal control officers. When staffing is this lean, agencies are forced into a primarily reactive posture: coverage gaps are common, response priorities narrow to the most urgent calls, and routine prevention work (education, compliance checks, and proactive patrol) is reduced. Lean staffing also raises officer-safety and community-safety concerns, particularly when single officers must handle high-risk calls, complex cruelty/neglect investigations, or after-hours incidents without back-up.

Low Compensation

Animal control is widely recognized as a high-stress profession, and low compensation makes recruitment and retention difficult. Recent federal wage estimates for ACOs in New Mexico place the annual mean wage at roughly \$37,000 (below \$40,000), which can be comparable to wages offered for entry-level supervisory roles in fast food establishments.

Turnover further destabilizes staffing. Low pay, combined with fatigue, burnout, secondary traumatic stress from repeated exposure to cruelty and neglect, euthanasia-related stress, and poor working conditions, all contribute to high turnover and a constant “training new hires” cycle that reduces operational continuity.

Resource limitations and staffing challenges reinforce each other. Where there is insufficient funding, programs may be unable to support adequate staffing levels, pay for training and continuing education, or purchase the equipment required for safe, humane field operations. This can result in reduced capacity to investigate cases thoroughly, maintain consistent enforcement, appear in court, and sustain proactive work that prevents future violations.

In practice, under-resourced agencies may spend most of their time responding to chronic, repeat situations while losing opportunities to reach the larger share of residents who want to comply but need clearer expectations, education, or access to basic services.

Finally, staffing needs cannot be determined by “calls for service” alone. The service spectrum of each department varies based on management philosophy, local ordinances, enforcement responsibilities, community expectations, population density, species diversity, and the geographic area served.

Capacity for Duties Beyond Service Calls

Staffing models that focus only on response time or call volume can overlook critical workload components such as officer-initiated activity, investigations, preventive patrol time, court preparation and appearances, training, assisting other agencies, and time-consuming follow-up work required to achieve compliance and protect both people and animals. There is no universally accepted per-capita ratio for animal control staffing; instead, professional guidance emphasizes using multiple inputs to justify staffing in a way that reflects actual service delivery needs and safety requirements.

One practical planning concept is the “relief factor” needed for year-round coverage. A single eight-hour daily field coverage position requires 2,920 hours per year (8 hours × 365 days). Once leave, sick time, training, court time, and other required duties are accounted for, one officer’s annual availability is substantially lower, meaning more than one full-time employee is needed to reliably staff a single daily coverage “beat” across the year.

This helps explain why one- and two-officer county programs struggle to provide consistent coverage while also meeting investigation, court, and prevention responsibilities.

Dangers of the Job

Animal control is a difficult and sometimes dangerous profession. ACOs routinely work alone, in unpredictable environments, and in situations that can escalate quickly. The job involves direct contact with animals that may be fearful, injured, unsocialized, or aggressive, and it also involves frequent interaction with people who may be stressed, frustrated, intoxicated, or hostile, especially when an ordinance violation, seizure, or enforcement action is involved.

These conditions create a unique risk profile that blends public safety, occupational safety, and public health exposure.

Risks from Animals

ACOs face a daily risk of bites, scratches, and other injuries during capture, confinement, and transport—particularly when responding to dogs running at large, pack behavior, or serious bite/attack cases. High-risk calls can involve multiple dogs, limited containment options, and fast-changing scenes. Even when an animal is not overtly aggressive, fear-based reactions can lead to sudden lunges or redirects during handling. These realities are amplified during serious bite investigations, where officers may need to secure animals safely, preserve evidence, and coordinate quarantine/observation requirements.

Risks from People and Conflict Escalation

ACOs also face risks from people. Owners may become angry or confrontational when they are told they are in violation of an ordinance, when a dog is impounded, or when enforcement escalates for repeat offenses. Stakeholders and practitioners have noted a broader trend of the public being less cooperative and more likely to challenge public servants in the field.

ACOs also may respond to properties where firearms are common. In New Mexico, there is no general state permit required to possess most firearms, which can heighten perceived and actual risk during contentious encounters. Threats and intimidation are a significant stressor and reinforce the need for strong policies around scene safety, backup requests, and documentation.

Zoonotic Disease Exposure

Animal control work includes regular exposure to zoonotic disease risks and unsanitary conditions. Depending on the call type, ACOs may encounter rabies risk through bite response and wildlife handling; parasites; and infectious conditions that can transmit through bites, scratches, aerosols, contaminated surfaces, or fecal exposure. Common zoonotic concerns associated with dogs and cats (directly or indirectly through ticks/fleas and contaminated environments) include rabies, ringworm, leptospirosis, giardia, certain intestinal parasites, and other regionally relevant diseases. This risk profile increases when officers respond to neglect environments, hoarding situations, or animals with unknown vaccination status.



ACOs face daily risks such as animal bites, disease exposure, accidents, and threats from irate residents. De-escalation of both animal and human aggression is an important part of training. Above: Los Alamos County Animal Control quarantines bite cases for 10 days.

Operational and Environmental Hazards

ACOs also face risks unrelated to aggression: vehicle crashes while responding to calls; roadside hazards while capturing animals near traffic; heat and cold exposure during prolonged field work; injuries from slips, falls, and lifting; and accidents resulting from misuse or lack of familiarity with equipment. Because officers often work away from their vehicle while pursuing or capturing an animal, reliable communication devices are a core safety need. Occupational safety is further strengthened when agencies provide consistent training, written policies, and appropriate protective equipment.

Wildlife and Species-Specific Handling Risks

In many parts of New Mexico, animal control officers are routinely asked to respond to wildlife calls—or they arrive on scenes where wildlife is involved—even when wildlife response is not a primary animal control function. Officers have described needing guidance on safe handling or containment for animals such as bobcats, hawks, rattlesnakes, and other wild species. Wildlife rehabilitation partners, such as the New Mexico Wildlife Center and local rehabilitators (see case study on page 128), often serve as critical technical resources in these cases. This reality

reinforces the need for species-specific awareness training, clear referral pathways, and equipment appropriate for safe, humane handling when wildlife is encountered.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Beyond physical risk, animal control work carries a heavy psychological load. Officers may witness severe neglect, cruelty, and the cumulative impacts of poverty, addiction, and mental health crises. They may also be involved in euthanasia decisions or repeated exposure to animals in distress. Over time, these experiences can contribute to compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress—especially when staffing is thin, calls are repetitive, and meaningful enforcement or compliance outcomes are hard to achieve.

These dangers reinforce a core theme of this report: animal control is a public safety and public health function, requiring staffing, training, equipment, and policies that match the realities ACOs face in the field.

4. Training

Stakeholders identified officer training as a regional need. Training is foundational to safe, effective, and humane animal control operations. ACOs routinely respond to emotionally charged situations and must be prepared to manage conflict, de-escalate irate individuals, and make quick decisions under pressure. Officers also face real safety risks from both people and animals. For this reason, training must cover not only animal handling, but also officer safety, communication, situational awareness, and basic investigative practices.

A well-trained ACO must be able to use tools and tactics correctly. Proper training reduces the risk of injury to the public, the officer, and the animal and improves the professionalism and credibility of field operations. Stakeholders noted that community reports sometimes include concerns about improper handling of animals or misuse of equipment in the field. This reinforces the need for training that includes both instruction and supervised practice on humane handling tools and techniques, along with clear agency policies that standardize when and how tools should be used.



Photo by Humane Innovations

Wearing bite-proof gloves, John Peaveler, owner of Humane Innovations, demonstrates the correct use of an animal control pole. ACO training includes instruction in safe, humane animal capture and handling.

Core Topics

Animal control training topics typically include:

- Safe animal handling and capture methods appropriate to risk level and species
- De-escalation, communication skills, and managing high-conflict encounters
- Officer safety practices, including scene assessment and coordination with law enforcement when needed
- Bite response procedures and rabies-related protocols, including quarantine/observation processes and documentation
- Cruelty and neglect investigations, evidence documentation, and court preparation
- Correct use of field tools such as catch poles, humane trapping equipment, and other capture devices
- Chemical immobilization policies and procedures (where authorized), emphasizing safety, legal requirements, and veterinary oversight
- Agency protocols related to weapons or deterrents (including limitations, reporting requirements, and safety standards)

Certification and Continuing Education

Although training pathways vary by jurisdiction, a widely recognized foundation for animal control training is professional certification and through established training organizations such as NACA.

Many agencies use national certification curricula as a baseline because it provides standardized instruction, common terminology, and tested best practices that can be applied across jurisdictions. Ongoing training is equally important: laws change, tools evolve, community expectations shift, and officers need refreshers to maintain consistent performance.

Training should also be viewed as a retention and professionalism strategy. When agencies invest in training and create clear career pathways, they improve recruitment, reduce turnover, and increase consistency in enforcement and community engagement. Conversely, when training budgets are limited, agencies may be forced to place officers in the field without adequate preparation, increasing risk and reducing public confidence.

Law Enforcement Integration

In some jurisdictions, animal control programs operate within a police or sheriff's department. In those models, ACOs may receive additional law enforcement training, and in some cases, agencies

may send ACOs to law enforcement academies. These approaches can strengthen coordination for high-risk calls and criminal investigations.

However, even when ACOs have law enforcement training, specialized animal care and control training remains essential because animal control work includes distinct technical skills not typically covered in standard law enforcement training. These include safe capture, animal behavior assessment, humane handling, shelter/holding interface, and welfare investigations.

5. Enforcement and Prosecution

Enforcement and prosecution are essential components of an effective animal control system, but stakeholders in the study area reported persistent gaps that limit accountability and weaken prevention.

Common Challenges

In multiple jurisdictions, interviewees described situations where animal control or law enforcement may be reluctant to respond, reluctant to charge, or constrained by limited staffing and unclear enforcement pathways. Stakeholders also reported that animal cases are sometimes dismissed in court, creating community frustration and the perception that animal laws are not consistently enforced.



Photo by Stacy Sutton Kerby/APNM

Officer training was cited as a regional need. Above: Ruben Lucero, APNM Cruelty Response and Tribal Affairs Manager, welcomes attendees to a cruelty investigation workshop co-sponsored by the ASPCA.⁹²



Stakeholders cited the lack of holding facilities as one of the top challenges in enforcement and response. In cruelty cases and disasters, shelters often need support to intake large numbers of animals and/or hold animals in protective custody.

New Mexico's seized animal disposition statute (§ 30-18-1.2 NMSA 1978) and national orgs with field response divisions may be aids in these incidents.

Left: Humane World for Animals sets up a temporary shelter for a hoarding seizure.

Repeat Offenders

These challenges have real operational consequences. When enforcement is inconsistent, agencies often see the same issues, and the same individuals, again and again. ACOs described repeat offenders in dogs running at large, chronic nuisance complaints such as barking, and repeat backyard breeding situations. Without reliable escalation pathways, officers spend significant time responding to calls without achieving durable compliance. This increases workload, contributes to burnout, and limits time available for proactive work that could prevent future violations.

Multi-Agency Coordination

A stronger enforcement and prosecution ecosystem depends on clear roles and consistent case pathways. Animal-related calls and investigations often require coordination across multiple entities: animal control (field response and documentation), other law enforcement (criminal thresholds and certain investigative authorities), public health (bite response), prosecutors (charging decisions and case strategy), and courts (case outcomes and court-ordered conditions). When roles are unclear or when case criteria differ between agencies, cases may stall or be declined, even when the underlying behavior is serious or repeated.

Improving outcomes does not require a purely punitive approach. Most animal control work is best

resolved through progressive enforcement and problem-solving: education, warnings, compliance deadlines, rechecks, and targeted interventions that address root causes (containment failures, lack of resources, lack of understanding). However, progressive approaches only work when there is a credible, predictable escalation pathway for repeat or high-risk offenders. This includes consistent documentation standards, repeat-offender tracking, and agreed-upon thresholds for when cases should be referred for prosecution.

Large-Scale Cases and Surge Incidents

Stakeholders noted that certain incidents can exceed local capacity, including large-scale cruelty or neglect cases (e.g., multi-animal seizures related to hoarding or criminal animal fighting) and disasters that suddenly displace large numbers of animals.

These events create substantial operational and financial demands on local systems, often requiring expanded sheltering, staffing, veterinary care, evidence-quality documentation, and long-term holding when animals are involved in an active criminal case.

To expand capacity during a response and reduce delays, local agencies can establish mutual aid agreements and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with qualified regional or national partners before an incident occurs. Potential partners include

animal welfare organizations with field response divisions, such as the ASPCA, National Animal Rescue and Sheltering Coalition, and Humane World for Animals (see Resources). Advance agreements should define activation triggers, roles, cost responsibilities, and documentation expectations.

When rescued animals must remain in protective custody while a cruelty case proceeds through the court system, care costs can become significant. Stakeholder agencies may be able to rely on Section 30-18-1.2 NMSA 1978, which governs the disposition of seized animals and responsibility for care costs while they are in custody.

Under this law, if the court finds evidence of owner cruelty, the seizing agency or custodian may petition the court to require the owner to post a bond or other security to fund the costs of care for the seized animals. If the owner fails to pay, ownership may be transferred to the custodian, allowing the shelter to pursue outcomes for the animal rather than hold it indefinitely (i.e., adopt out, transfer, or humanely euthanize if necessary). This mechanism helps offset care costs and protect animal welfare by preventing animals from languishing in custody during lengthy legal proceedings.

Cruelty Investigations

Cruelty investigations are a core function of modern animal control. They can range from routine neglect cases to complex, multi-agency criminal investigations. These cases require a combination of humane handling skills, investigative training, careful documentation, and coordination with partners such as law enforcement, prosecutors, veterinarians, shelters, and, in some situations, adult protective services, child protective services, and domestic violence programs.

Types of Cruelty Investigations

Investigations can include but are not limited to:

- Animal neglect (failure to provide basic care)
- Embedded collars and untreated injuries
- Animal hoarding
- Physical abuse of an animal
- Poisoning or suspected poisoning



This dog's wound was caused by an embedded collar, a sign of long-term neglect and a violation of the state animal cruelty statute.⁹³ Dog neglect and abuse are the most common calls to APNM's Cruelty Helpline, 877-548-6263.

- Shooting or other intentional injury
- Sexual abuse of an animal
- Organized animal fighting

How Investigations Begin

Most cruelty cases begin with a complaint call from the public or a referral from a partner agency. An ACO may initiate an investigation when there is reason to believe an animal's welfare has been harmed through negligence or intentional acts.

In many communities, the majority of cases fall under neglect rather than intentional violence. Neglect falls along a spectrum, from failure to provide adequate food, water, shelter, or humane confinement, to failure to obtain veterinary care for injuries or illness, to chronic conditions such as embedded collars or severe parasite infestations. While many neglect cases involve education and compliance efforts, repeat or severe neglect can rise to criminal thresholds.

More serious cases involve intentional harm or organized cruelty. These investigations often require stronger scene control, higher evidentiary standards,

and closer coordination with law enforcement and prosecutors. They may also involve search warrants, forensic veterinary examinations, chain-of-custody evidence handling, and longer-term animal holding plans.

Documentation Standards

Cruelty investigations are evidence-driven. An ACO must be able to document conditions clearly and objectively, including:

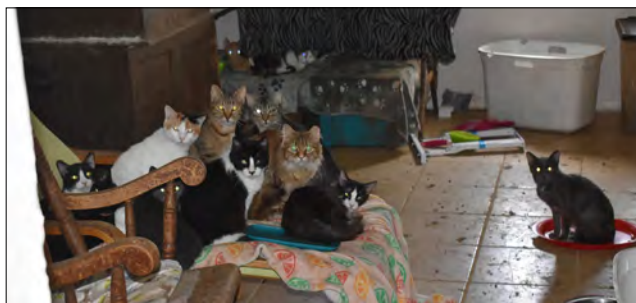
- Date/time and location (scene description)
- Animal identification (species, description, photographs, microchip scan results if available)
- Animal condition (body condition, injuries, coat/skin condition, mobility, behavior)
- Environment (water/food availability, shelter, temperature exposure, confinement conditions, sanitation, hazards)
- Owner or custodian identity and statements
- Witness statements and contact information
- Prior history when relevant (repeat calls, prior warnings/citations, prior seizures)
- Veterinary findings when needed to support severity and treatment needs
- Evidence collection and preservation (suspected toxins, weapons-related evidence, fighting paraphernalia)
- Following chain-of-custody practices and coordinating with law enforcement

Because these cases may proceed to court, documentation must be detailed, consistent, and defensible. Strong casework also includes clear follow-up plans: rechecks, compliance deadlines, referrals to services, escalation thresholds, and coordination with prosecutors on charging decisions.

Animal Impacts

Animals rescued from cruelty cases are often traumatized, injured, sick, malnourished, or behaviorally shut down due to chronic stress. With veterinary treatment, rehabilitation, and patient handling, many can recover and eventually be placed into safe homes.

Photos by NMDOG; Garland Humane Society



Cats are a common species involved in hoarding. Rescued animals are often sick, injured, malnourished, and/or severely matted. Individuals and animal rescues are both susceptible to slipping into hoarding.

Hoarding

Animal hoarding is a multifaceted form of neglect characterized by the accumulation of animals beyond the ability of an individual or organization to provide adequate care. Those involved in these situations often fail to recognize the seriousness of the conditions, despite clear evidence of harm to both animals and the living environment.

“Noah’s Syndrome”

Known clinically as Animal Hoarding Disorder, sometimes referred to as Noah’s Syndrome, this behavior is a subset of Hoarding Disorder, first recognized in the American Psychiatric Association’s *DSM-5* (2013). It often reflects complex psychological and social dynamics rather than intentional cruelty.

Hoarding cases frequently involve large numbers of animals, sometimes across multiple species, housed together in crowded and unsanitary environments. While individuals may sincerely believe they are rescuing or protecting animals, the reality is often chronic suffering. Animals in hoarding situations commonly experience illness and injury, malnutrition, parasite infestations, uncontrolled breeding, and prolonged stress. Deceased animals may remain on the property, intensifying health risks and trauma for both animals and responders.

The impact of animal hoarding extends beyond animal welfare. Living spaces are often cluttered



This San Miguel County dog-hoarding situation promoted itself as a “wolf sanctuary.” NMDOG video surveillance shared with the state Attorney General’s Office showed about 50 dogs on the property, attacking each other and feeding on their own puppies. NMDOG’s effort, aided by HSUS (now Humane World for Animals), led to the seizure of all the dogs.

with debris, waste, and soiled materials, creating hazardous conditions for occupants and neighbors alike. These environments may pose public health risks and structural dangers, making them unsafe for entry without careful planning. Responders frequently encounter biohazards, unstable structures, and emotionally charged situations, all of which require deliberate safety protocols, detailed documentation, and humane handling of animals.

A Cross-Sector Response

Importantly, animal hoarding is not solely an animal control issue. It is often intertwined with behavioral health concerns, housing instability, and the safety of vulnerable individuals. Traditional criminal prosecution alone is frequently insufficient, as many cases involve competency concerns or require mental health evaluations and treatment as part of resolution. Without addressing the underlying human needs, hoarding situations are highly likely to recur, even after animals are removed.

Effective responses therefore depend on coordinated, cross-sector collaboration. ACOs must be trained to recognize when to involve partner agencies such as adult or child protective services, behavioral health professionals, environmental health, fire services, or law enforcement. This integrated approach improves outcomes for both people and animals while reducing the likelihood of repeated cases.

Operational Challenges and System Impacts

Hoarding cases place significant strain on local systems. They demand extended on-scene time, veterinary triage, expanded shelter capacity, meticulous recordkeeping, and long-term monitoring when limited animal retention is permitted. Because these cases can overwhelm resources, jurisdictions benefit from advance planning, mutual aid agreements, and established partnerships to support large-scale response and recovery efforts.

Criminal Animal Fighting

Organized animal fighting (most often dog fighting and rooster fighting) is a serious form of cruelty consistently treated by law enforcement and prosecutors as more than an “animal issue.”

These operations commonly involve the deliberate conditioning of animals for violence, financial incentives (often tied to gambling), and a culture of secrecy that can create risks for community safety. In practice, animals may be weaponized through intentional breeding, training, and socialization practices that increase aggression and reduce inhibition, which elevates risk not only to other animals but also to people who come into contact with the animals used in fighting.

New Mexico Legal Landscape

New Mexico has made significant legal progress over the past two decades in addressing animal fighting. Cockfighting was banned in the state in 2007, and dog fighting has been illegal in New Mexico for decades.

Nevertheless, underground animal fighting continues. For example, in March 2026 authorities broke up a massive cockfighting ring in Chaves County, detaining over 100 participants.⁹¹

In 2025, New Mexico strengthened its legal tools for addressing organized animal fighting as part of larger criminal enterprises. Senate Bill 70 expanded the list of predicate offenses under New Mexico’s Racketeering Act to include organized animal fighting activities. This change is important because racketeering frameworks address patterns of organized criminal activity and can allow stronger penalties and enforcement tools than stand-alone cruelty charges, including mechanisms that can disrupt networks and deter repeat offenders.



Organized dog fighting is a felony offense in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Above: A rescued dog with facial scars common to criminal dog fighting.



Commonly found at cockfighting sites, gaffs are blades tied to the fighting birds' legs. New Mexico and Louisiana were the last states to ban rooster fighting, in 2007.

Connections to Other Criminal Activity

National law enforcement perspectives frequently note that organized animal fighting rings can intersect with other illegal conduct. When animal fighting occurs as part of a larger organized operation, the surrounding activity can involve gambling, weapons violations, drug trafficking, and other offenses. For this reason, animal fighting investigations are often most effective when handled through coordinated, multi-agency approaches that treat animal fighting as a potential indicator of broader criminal enterprise activity, not simply as a single cruelty event.

Investigation and Prosecution Needs

Animal fighting cases are complex to investigate and prosecute. Successful cases typically depend on:

- Early scene security and clear roles between animal control and law enforcement
- Evidence-quality documentation (photographs, condition scoring, injury documentation, location mapping, witness statements)
- Strong chain-of-custody practices for physical evidence (fighting paraphernalia, equipment)
- Digital evidence capacity (communications, social media, transaction records) when applicable
- Humane, safe handling and transport protocols due to the elevated risk
- Appropriate long-duration animal holding plans when animals are evidence in a criminal case

Forensic veterinary expertise is often a key factor in these cases. Veterinary professionals with forensic training can help identify patterns of injury consistent with fighting, distinguish old and new injuries, document suffering, support timing assessments, and produce findings that are understandable and credible in court. This strengthens charging decisions and can reduce the likelihood of cases being declined or dismissed due to insufficient evidentiary support.

Data and Reporting Considerations

Quantifying animal fighting is challenging. Nationally, incident-based crime reporting frameworks include animal cruelty categories that can capture organized abuse (which includes animal fighting). However, reporting completeness varies by jurisdiction, and in many communities animal cruelty investigations are not consistently entered into law-enforcement reporting systems unless there are clear handoff procedures between animal control and a law enforcement partner. Improving cross-reporting protocols and ensuring organized animal fighting is documented consistently helps strengthen situational awareness and supports strategic enforcement.

Overall, organized animal fighting is a high-severity issue where prevention is limited and enforcement is essential. Strong laws, clear reporting, coordinated investigations, and forensic veterinary capacity are central to identifying and dismantling organized animal fighting activity and protecting both animals and communities.

Best Practices in Animal Control

Best practices in animal control combine public safety, public health, humane outcomes, and operational accountability. Effective programs are built to reduce preventable harm before it escalates, while maintaining clear enforcement authority for high-risk and repeat situations.

Across jurisdictions, the strongest systems share a common set of features: modern ordinances and policies, adequate staffing and training, strong partnerships, consistent data practices, and a service model that emphasizes field-based resolution whenever it is safe and appropriate.

Clear Policies

A modern animal control program begins with clear legal authority and written policies. In addition to a strong state animal cruelty statute, communities benefit when they have an up-to-date animal ordinance that addresses dogs running at large, licensing and vaccination requirements, nuisance issues, dangerous dog processes, and basic standards of care. Clear definitions and graduated enforcement pathways support consistency and fairness: education and warnings can resolve many issues, but repeat or high-risk violations must have predictable escalation options. Written procedures also protect due process and help officers document cases to a standard that holds up in court.

Field Services Model

Strong programs use a field services model that prioritizes outcomes rather than intake volume. National field data indicates that most animal control activity is driven by quality-of-life issues and roaming-at-large calls, while a smaller but significant share involves public safety incidents and welfare investigations. Best practice agencies use tools such as field return-to-owner, identification scanning, reunification support, and compliance-based interventions to reduce unnecessary impoundment. This approach protects limited shelter capacity, reduces costs, and improves community satisfaction. It also helps agencies focus shelter intake on animals that truly require impoundment for safety, legal, or welfare reasons.

Staffing and Training

Staffing and training are central to safe and effective service. Animal control work is high-risk and public-facing; officers need consistent training in humane handling, de-escalation, bite response and rabies protocols, cruelty investigations, documentation, and court preparation. Programs should also plan staffing based on more than calls for service. Geographic coverage, enforcement responsibilities, investigation workload, court time, officer-initiated activity, assisting other agencies, and proactive patrol all affect staffing needs. When staffing is too lean, agencies become reactive, prevention work declines, and both officer safety and community safety suffer.

Interagency Coordination

Best practices also include robust interagency coordination and pre-planned surge support. Many animal control issues overlap with law enforcement, public health, prosecutors, emergency management, and human services. Bite cases require public health coordination; cruelty and hoarding cases may involve adult protective services or child welfare; and large-scale cases can overwhelm local capacity. High-functioning systems use clear referral pathways, cross-reporting practices, and memoranda of understanding with partners to clarify roles and reduce delays. For disasters and large cruelty cases, advance agreements with qualified field response organizations can support logistics, temporary sheltering, and evidence-quality documentation.

Data and Transparency

Finally, best practices depend on data, transparency, and community engagement. Programs that track call types, outcomes, repeat locations, bite trends, and compliance results can target resources more effectively and demonstrate value to decision-makers. Community education and prevention—especially around containment, identification, vaccination, and responsible ownership—reduces repeat calls and improves safety.

When combined, these best practices create an animal control system that is humane, consistent, and resilient, improving quality of life for residents while protecting both people and animals.

A small city in central Arkansas (pop. 28,000) offers a powerful example of effective animal services that achieve outcomes benefitting animals, residents, and the local economy alike.

Under the direction of Mike Wheeler, Director of Community Services for the City of Cabot, the town has transformed its approach to animal welfare through leadership, government partnership, and deep community engagement.

When Wheeler joined the department in 2009, Cabot faced a serious issue: stray dogs roamed the community, posing risks to both public safety and animal welfare. Rather than relying solely on enforcement, Wheeler began implementing shelter diversion strategies and innovative field services. His philosophy was rooted in access and compassion, as he never wanted to turn someone away. “Who am I to decide who ‘deserves’ help?” he asks.

Community Programs

That mindset led to a pivotal moment in 2020, when Wheeler conceived of 23 community-based programs in a single night, all focused on keeping pets with their families.

Today, Cabot Animal Support Services (CASS) employs 4 field officers and 11 shelter staff to serve 3,000 injured and homeless pets each year through a wide range of initiatives. These include community cat caretaking, working cat placements, spay/neuter services, microchipping, drive-through vaccinations, rehoming assistance, veterinary cost support, domestic violence resources, pet food assistance, fence repair, and even a “Crops & Canines” community garden. These programs run solely on community donations. Wheeler has the autonomy to create or

adapt programs quickly in response to community needs.

“Go Everywhere”

From the beginning of his tenure, Wheeler invested heavily in building relationships across city government. “16,000 people have my business card because I go everywhere,” he says. By attending public meetings, listening to concerns, and focusing conversations on people rather than animals alone, Wheeler aligned animal services with broader civic and economic priorities.

The results have been dramatic. Cabot’s save rate increased from 65 percent in 2009 to 99 percent in 2024, remaining above 90 percent for more than a decade. The department also shifted away from punitive enforcement: annual citations dropped from 240 in 2012 to about 50 today, as animal control officers prioritize education and support.

As trust grew, so did investment. Between 2019 and 2025, staff increased from 5 to 15 employees, and the agency’s budget rose from \$425,000 to \$1.7 million. “City government started asking what we needed,” Wheeler notes.

CASS’s collaborative approach even helped attract Arkansas’s first veterinary school. Lyon College, slated to open in 2027, will share a campus with CASS’s new animal services facility, which will serve as a veterinary teaching hospital.

A rendering of
CASS’s new facility
at Lyon College



City of Cabot, Ark.

“Go to the city council, go to the water commission, go everywhere. Remember: you can’t help animals without helping people; you can’t help people without helping animals.”

—**Mike Wheeler**,
Director, Cabot Animal Support Services; Board President, NACA

Recommendations

The stakeholder-identified needs previously described require solutions at both the state and local levels. The State has the ability and responsibility to establish robust resources and frameworks that set up local animal control agencies for success. The following recommendations include reforms and actions involving legislation, enforcement, agency infrastructure, workforce development, and community responsibility.

State-Level Recommendations

Legislative Reform

1. Strengthen animal protection, animal welfare awareness, crime prevention, and offender rehabilitation.

- a. Amend the New Mexico animal cruelty statute and related criminal procedure laws to improve enforceability and case outcomes (clearer authority and timelines for seizure/forfeiture where appropriate, restitution for care costs, and improved tools for addressing chronic neglect and large-scale cases).
- b. Amend the Family Violence Prevention Act to add animal abuse as a trigger for protective orders and allow judges to include companion animals in protective orders.
- c. Amend Chapter 22 NMSA to establish statewide humane education curriculum in public schools, with emphasis on early childhood education and practical safety messaging.
- d. Based on identified needs, develop and implement an animal control grants program to provide state funding to facilitate intergovernmental MOUs (municipal-county-tribal agreements).

2. Recognize and incorporate animal control officers as statutory first responders.

- a. Amend the Emergency Communications Interoperability Act and other relevant state laws and regulations to include animal control officers within the statutory definition of “first responder,” consistent with national professional guidance recognizing animal control as a frontline public safety and public health role that routinely operates alongside law enforcement, fire, EMS, and EM during crises.
- b. Pair statutory recognition with practical implementation steps, such as inclusion in emergency response planning and training structures, improved access to appropriate safety equipment and training, and clear interagency protocols for coordinated response.

3. Remove state barriers to community-based field services.

- a. Amend the Veterinary Practice Act to establish Microchip Technician certification, allowing ACOs and other designated responders to implant microchips in animals in the field, paired with clear documentation and owner-consent standards.

Cross-Jurisdiction Support and Coordination

4. Support local jurisdictions in establishing, strengthening, and staffing animal control programs.

- a. Develop and provide a state models and standards “toolkit” that includes model ordinance language, minimum staffing/equipment/training standards, dispatch/referral protocols, and phased implementation guidance.
- b. Establish state ACO certification, baseline training requirements, and continuing education expectations.
- c. Provide and/or fund training for ACOs and law enforcement officers in animal control operations, species-specific handling, emergency response, de-escalation, cruelty investigations, coordinated case workflows, and knowledge of animal protection statutes and ordinances.

5. Train and equip professionals and community members to incorporate animal protection concerns in their intersectional work.

- a. Promote cross-reporting protocols across relevant professions (animal control, social services, healthcare, behavioral health, law enforcement, and domestic violence services) to identify risk earlier and prevent escalation.
- b. Provide training for legal and judicial professionals on animal law fundamentals, the Link, and what strong cruelty investigations require for evidence and due process.
- c. Invest state resources in building co-sheltering capacity in domestic violence/crisis shelters.

6. Assist with investigation and prosecution of animal cruelty crimes.

- a. Create an animal crimes unit within the New Mexico Department of Justice or another state agency with law enforcement authority, dedicated to supporting and bridging gaps in animal cruelty investigations and prosecutions.
- b. Network with law enforcement and prosecutors to support investigation and prosecution of animal cruelty crimes and coordinate certain complex or serious cases such as animal fighting, hoarding, and where local officials cannot or will not take needed action.
- c. Amass resources for temporary holding facilities for large-scale animal cruelty seizures, available to local agencies.
- d. Establish a statewide Animal Protection Hotline and publish clear public guidance on how and when to report neglect and cruelty.

7. Using available animal control and other data, and in consultation with experts, identify hotspots and target state funding/resources to areas with high rates of strays, bites/attacks, welfare calls, and repeat offenders/locations.

8. Implement a statewide public awareness campaign promoting responsible companion animal care and ownership.

- a. Provide respectful, inclusive public guidance on animal care topics including humane containment, identification (microchips, tags), vaccinations, veterinary care, bite prevention, and the need for spay/neuter.



Doña Ana County Animal Control deploys to emergencies across the state. Here, ACO Carlos Herrera checks on a rescued pet in the emergency shelter trailer after Ruidoso's 2024 South Fork Fire.

Local-Level Recommendations

Resource and Capacity Building

1. Establish animal control programs in coverage deserts.

- a. Develop regional/shared-services animal control partnerships (county–municipal–tribal agreements) to provide predictable response, enforcement support, and referral pathways in communities without dedicated animal control capacity.

2. Establish and operate adequate animal holding facilities to serve jurisdictions' needs.

- a. Where there is lack of permanent animal holding capacity, and until it is developed, immediately establish temporary solutions with necessary staffing and equipment.
- b. Establish permanent animal holding capacity, for both routine and emergency operations, in partnership with the region's or jurisdiction's animal sheltering and emergency response functions.

3. Ensure adequate funding, staffing, and equipment for animal control programs.

- a. Conduct staffing assessments using multiple inputs (calls for service, officer-initiated activity, investigations, court time, after-hours coverage expectations, geographic coverage area, and public safety risk) and incorporate a relief factor for year-round coverage planning.
- b. Establish minimum equipment and safety standards for field services (reliable vehicles and communications, humane handling tools, microchip scanners, PPE, and training budgets) and align compensation/career pathways to recruitment and retention needs.

Local Policy and Enforcement

4. Strengthen enforcement and prosecution of animal law/ordinance violations in tandem with community-based field services.

- a. Support Return-to-Owner, Return-to-Field, and other shelter intake diversion initiatives while maintaining clear escalation pathways for repeat or high-risk offenders.
- b. Establish consistent case pathways and documentation standards so animal control, law enforcement, prosecutors, and courts share thresholds for escalation (repeat dogs running at large, serious bite cases, chronic neglect/hoarding conditions, organized cruelty).

5. Modernize local animal ordinances.

- a. Establish animal ordinances in jurisdictions lacking them.
- b. Revise local ordinances to reflect best practices in issues such as TNR/TNVR where applicable, breeding without a permit, microchipping and identification, running at large, nuisance enforcement, vaccination compliance, and behavior-based dangerous dog processes.

Workforce Development

6. Promote, incentivize, and professionalize animal control as a career.

- a. Upgrade ACO compensation and benefits to reflect duties performed, hazard exposure, and on-call/after-hours expectations.
- b. Support staff development and advancement opportunities through structured training ladders, mentorship, and leadership development.



Lightning and Milagro, a starving mare and her foal, taken to auction by the New Mexico Livestock Board (NMLB) and now healthy and free at Sky Mountain Wild Horse Sanctuary.

State legislation passed in 2023 gives rescues right of first refusal to purchase equines seized by NMLB, keeping them out of the slaughter pipeline.

Equine Rescues

Introduction

Horses, donkeys, and mules play a key role in New Mexico's history, culture, and economy. Equines have served as spiritual symbols, performance and work animals, economic engines to different industries, and critical transport partners. Whether viewed as property, livestock, companions, or sacred relatives, these iconic animals of the West are both honored and neglected in New Mexico.

"Caring for equines throughout their life cycle should be the norm in New Mexico."

—**Lauri Michael**,
Co-Chair, New Mexico
Equine Rescue Alliance

Photo by Heidi Baxter/APNM



Equine Spirit Sanctuary director Ruth Bourgeois, left, checks on Blanco with volunteer Mitzi Mortenson.

Photo by NMLB

Equines in New Mexico History

Equines are inseparable from the history of New Mexico. Traditionally, they were used for transportation, warfare, hunting, farming, and ranching.

Mitochondrial DNA science shows that the genus *Equus* (horses, donkeys, and zebras) is native to North America. Conventional scholarship posits that horses became extinct and were reintroduced by the Spanish in the 1500s.⁹⁴ However, emerging indigenous research demonstrates that many North American tribes partnered with horses much longer than previously thought.⁹⁵

Horse culture and spirituality are deeply embedded in Native communities across North America, including in New Mexico. The Pueblo of San Felipe, for example, is home to a herd of free-roaming horses on the tribal lands. "Horses have cultural value and are part of the Pueblo's values," explains Pinu'u Stout, Director of Natural Resources for the Pueblo. "The Tribe respects horses. Policymakers should care because there is a very special relationship between horses and humans."

Equines in New Mexico Today

Equines remain an important part of our state's culture, and continue to contribute to the economy.

Legally, New Mexico statute designates horses, donkeys, and mules as livestock, but in reality, for many people, equines differ from animals used for food and fiber. They fall in "a grey area," writes equine expert Christina Keim, "not quite livestock, not quite companion animal."⁹⁶ This ambiguity shapes how horses and other equines are treated, protected, and managed. It lies at the heart of the challenges these hooved partners in New Mexico's development face today.

The majority of New Mexico's domestic equines are used for recreation and companionship. Horses serve in the rodeo, racing, and show industries. "We raise kids to ride, show, perform in rodeos, and ride for pleasure," says Dr. Alexandra Eckhoff, NMLB veterinarian, regarding some of the ways equines are woven into the culture of New Mexico.

Equines also serve in therapeutic and equine-facilitated learning programs, helping youth and



William Henry Jackson photographed "Diego and his burro, San Juan Pueblo," now Ohkay Owingeh, circa 1875-1880.



"Cowboys Going to Dinner," near Wagon Mound in Mora County, circa 1897

adults recover from mental health challenges, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and serving those with physical and cognitive disabilities.

Additionally, equines work on ranches in cattle operations, as pack animals, and in the hunting industry.

National Events with Local Impact

Two major events in the early 2000s dramatically impacted equine welfare across the nation, including in New Mexico. The first was the 2007 closure of the last three equine slaughterhouses in the U.S., in Texas and Illinois, raising the question of where the approximately 100,000 horses previously slaughtered annually would now go.⁹⁷

The second event was the Global Financial Crisis of



In this report, the term **wild horses** refers to equines from a federally designated wild horse territory or herd management area, or some tribal lands. **Free-roaming horses** refer to unhandled horses of unknown origin; some are descended from **domestic** horses, meaning those born and bred in captivity.

Left: Wild horses forage at Sky Mountain Wild Horse Sanctuary.

2008. As financial hardship spread, many horse owners found themselves unable to afford feed, veterinary care, or basic upkeep.

Here in New Mexico, the uptick in equine calls to APNM's Animal Cruelty Helpline sparked the creation of the Equine Protection Fund, a safety net program providing emergency assistance to equine owners and equine welfare organizations (see case study on page 103). Nationally, equine rescues grew significantly since that time, now numbering over 1,300, according to the United Horse Coalition.

The Ongoing Crisis for Equines

This is a critical time for equines in our state. "You have horses in New Mexico that live at the highest level of affluence," says Jennifer Rios, board president of The Horse Shelter. "And you have horses that live on the brink of starvation."⁹⁸ Large numbers of domestic, free-roaming, and wild equines experience neglect, abuse, starvation, and sale for slaughter.

Diverse factors drive equine needs in New Mexico. These include overarching conditions such as the economy, climate change, habitat loss, and equine overbreeding.

New Mexico-specific conditions affecting equine welfare include the absence of an Equine Standard of Care defined in statute, wide variation in how equines are viewed across the state, and resource limitations.

The scale of New Mexico's equine crisis underscores the need for comprehensive, long-term solutions rather than siloed or temporary measures.

Comprehensive Solutions Needed

One cornerstone of effective equine management is humane, science-based on-range management for wild and free-roaming horses. Rather than relying on roundups, New Mexico can adopt proven fertility control methods, such as the immunocontraceptive PZP vaccine. Research confirms that fertility control is essential to sustainable population management. Without it, removing horses from the range can actually accelerate population growth by reducing competition for limited forage.⁹⁹

Successful solutions must also be collaborative, because equines move freely across state, federal, tribal, public, and private lands. Coordination among state agencies, tribal governments, local communities, and other stakeholders is essential; it should include shared data tracking and consistent implementation of humane management plans.

State investment in equine rescue is also critical. Equine sheltering remains a neglected segment of New Mexico's animal welfare safety net. Unlike dog and cat shelters, which receive public funding, equine rescues rely largely on donations, grants, and dedicated enterprises such as resale shops. Shelter capacity is especially limited in tribal communities, where resources to address at-risk horses are scarce.

New Mexico has the opportunity to be a leader in humane equine management. By investing in fertility control, collaboration, sheltering infrastructure, and stronger laws, the state can protect its horses, donkeys, and mules while strengthening communities and honoring New Mexico's equine legacy.

What Equine Rescues Do

Equine rescues and sanctuaries are the lifeline for New Mexico's most vulnerable horses, donkeys, and mules. Yet despite their critical role in the larger equine industry, rescues' scope of work is often unknown to policymakers and the general public.

Equine rescues take in abused, abandoned, neglected, and surrendered equines. They provide a safe environment, nutrition, and veterinary and farrier (hoof) care; rehabilitation to restore rescued equines' health; and training to help the equines become good candidates for adoption. When possible, rescues secure permanent homes for these equines so they receive care throughout their lives. When that is not possible, or if a rescue is a sanctuary, the organization provides lifelong care to the rescued equine.

Why Equines Need Rescue

Each year in New Mexico, hundreds of equines face starvation, cruelty, and abandonment. The more fortunate are rescued. Other equines are surrendered by their owners due to circumstances such as owner illness, financial hardship, or death, or are surrendered by owners who no longer want them. Some equines are estray, meaning they are domestic equines found roaming at large and are impounded by the New Mexico Livestock Board (NMLB). NMLB also seizes equines subjected to cruelty and neglect.

Equines taken in by NMLB are offered for sale. For estrays, there is a five-day waiting period to give the owner a chance to reclaim the animal. If the equine is not reclaimed, licensed equine rescues have the right of first refusal, meaning these organizations have the first opportunity to bid on, or buy, these equines. Through the strong leadership of the New Mexico Equine Rescue Alliance (NEMERA), the network of the 14 NMLB-licensed rescues, bidding by rescues is coordinated to ensure successful purchase so that as many equines as possible are sold to rescues.

The Slaughter Pipeline

Unwanted equines who don't go to rescues often end up being sold at auction. Most private buyers are looking for healthy and handleable equines who can immediately serve the purpose the buyer intends them for, such as trail riding or farm work. However,



Equine rescues typically have small staffs and rely on volunteers for daily operations. Above: Volunteers at The Horse Shelter (THS) haul manure from the training arena. New Mexico's largest equine rescue, THS has over 80 volunteers, many of them highly trained in equine care.

equines from estray, abuse, neglect, and free-roaming situations are often in poor condition, are unhandled, or need rehabilitation, making them vulnerable to sale to "kill buyers," individuals or entities that purchase equines for sale to slaughterhouses in Mexico or Canada. Equines sold for slaughter are subjected to cruelty during transport and at slaughterhouses. Rescues are the best places for these animals because they can receive the care, rehabilitation, and training needed for adoption to a responsible owner, or lifelong care if they are unadoptable.

How Rescues Serve Equines in Need

Rescued equines arrive at rescues with diverse needs, including health conditions and fear resulting from abuse. Many rescued equines have experienced trauma and require gentle, consistent care to begin to build trust with humans; some have had little human contact and handling. Each equine is placed in quarantine upon arrival for a health assessment and as a precaution to control the spread of disease. Veterinary, nutritional, and farrier care needs are addressed by qualified professionals.

After rescued equines have had their initial health needs addressed and completed a quarantine period, each is assessed for comfort with human contact and level of training. Based on assessment results, equines may receive training to help them gain the skills needed to be safely handled. Many equines will



A sampling of equine rescue work (clockwise from top left): toting hay bags and building shelter structures at Walkin N Circles Ranch, training the next generation of horse enthusiasts at Tamaya Horse Rescue, sweeping the barn aisle at Equine Spirit Sanctuary, soaking an injured hoof at Horseshoe Canyon Rescue Ranch

receive training to learn the skills needed to help them find a new home. Due to age, health, or other factors, some equines may be offered for adoption as companion animals. Other equines are unadoptable and require lifelong care in a sanctuary environment.

For adoptable equines, rescues qualify adopters through an application and screening process. Potential adopters are assessed for their ability to care for an equine, skill level in handling the equine of their choice, and suitability of the adopter's facility. Adoption contracts ensure the health and safety of the adopted equine and include a clause providing for the equine's return to the rescue should the adopter become unable to keep the equine.

Licensure Requirements

Under New Mexico state law, all equine rescue and retirement facilities must be licensed by the New Mexico Livestock Board.¹⁰⁰ To become licensed, rescues must be 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, submit the required public reporting, create an Emergency Operations Plan, and complete annual on-site inspections with the NMLB. Licensure requires

rescues to provide veterinary care, including annual vaccinations, gelding all male equines, and, when necessary, humane euthanasia and disposal.

Currently, some entities engaged in equine rescue in New Mexico are not licensed and therefore are not subject to NMLB standards and oversight. In the absence of such standards and oversight, there is no assurance that equines are receiving appropriate care, and these operations risk devolving into hoarding situations. Because the statutory licensure requirement lacks an enforcement mechanism, NMLB is unable to prosecute violators.

New Mexico Equine Rescue Alliance

The statewide network of the 14 NMLB-licensed equine rescues provides essential services to New Mexico. From 2019 through 2025, NMLB took in 918 equines; nearly half came from NMLB and law enforcement seizures. No state funding is provided to NMLB rescues for staff, purchasing equines at auction, NMLB-required veterinary care, feed, infrastructure, or any other operational need.

Unique Services of North Central New Mexico's Rescues

"The equine rescue community is unique in New Mexico," says Lauri Michael, WNCR board president. "In most states, shelters compete with each other, but we regularly communicate with each other through the New Mexico Equine Rescue Alliance."

6 of 14 Licensed Rescues

Over 40 percent of the state's 14 licensed equine rescues are located in the study area (shaded area on map, page 97). They are **Equine Spirit Sanctuary (ESS)**, Ranchos de Taos; **Horseshoe Canyon Rescue Ranch (HCRR)**, Youngsville; **Tamaya Horse Rehab (THR)**, San Ysidro; **The Horse Shelter (THS)**, Cerrillos; **New Mexico Horse Rescue at Walkin N Circles Ranch (WNCR)**, Edgewood; and **Sky Mountain Wild Horse Sanctuary (SMWHS)**, located in San Miguel County.

Five of the six rescues serve domestic horses, donkeys, and mules; four of these take in unhandled equines. One organization serves wild horses and free-roaming equines. Four of the rescues rehabilitate and train equines for adoption. Four provide lifelong care for unadoptable equines.

Each of these organizations has been in operation between 7 and 25 years, and each serves between 14 and over 120 equines. Between 2021 and 2025, an average of 54 percent of these rescues' equine intakes came from law enforcement and the NMLB.¹⁰¹

Distinctive Services

The six rescues in the study area are unique in another way. While all care for at-risk equines, each organization has distinctive aspects to their work and the services provided to their local communities:

- **ESS** offers equine-assisted services for youth receiving mental health care.
- **HCRR** provides a forever home for unadoptable equines as well as small animals needing rescue, including dogs, cats, and a potbelly pig.
- **SMWHS** is reducing the number of wild and free-roaming horses needing rescue by decreasing breeding in herds using the wildlife immunocontraceptive PZP.
- **THR, THS, and WNCR**, serve the largest number of rescued equines in the region.



Photo by WNCR

Four of the region's rescues rehabilitate equines for adoption to qualified owners. Above: Rescue horse Rita finds a new home with a longtime WNCR supporter.

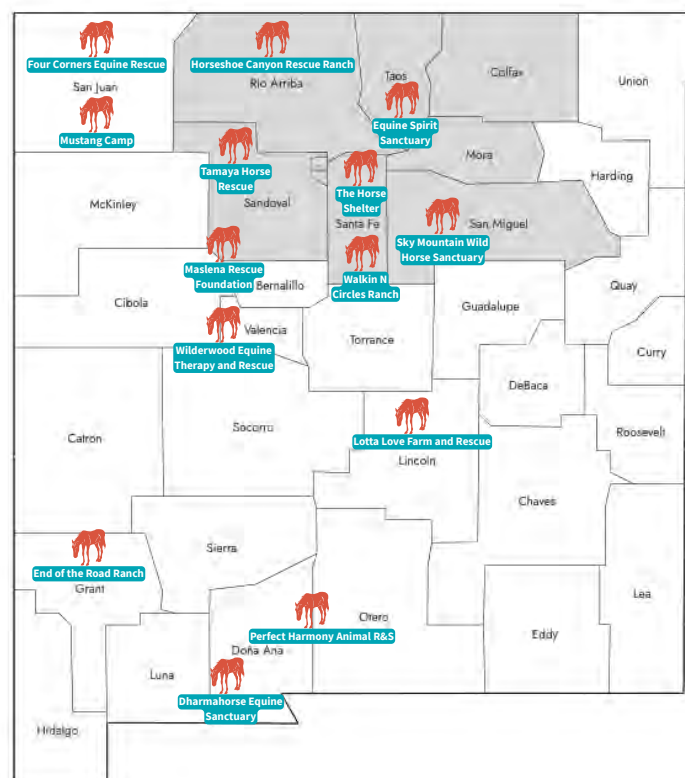
- **THR** offers trail rides for Tamaya Resort guests as well as riding lessons and family-friendly rodeos for locals.
- **THS** is the state's largest equine rescue and has a robust volunteer program.
- **WNCR** offers horse training demonstrations to the public and volunteer opportunities.

The table on page 97 shows data about the region's rescues, including current number of equines served (THS includes former rescues now serving as program horses).

If New Mexico's equine rescues didn't exist, "more horses would be abandoned," says THR founder and director Connie Collis. Equine owners can face hardships that put their equines at risk. "Some people won't ask for help because they're ashamed."

By working together and offering locally tailored services, the region's rescue organizations provide a strong foundation for excellent equine care as well as community education and service.

New Mexico's Licensed Equine Rescues



Acronyms Guide

The six NMLB-licensed equine rescues in north central New Mexico (shaded area of map at left) are:

ESS Equine Spirit Sanctuary

HCRR Horseshoe Canyon Rescue Ranch

SMWHS Sky Mountain Wild Horse Sanctuary

THR Tamaya Horse Rescue

THS The Horse Shelter

WNCR New Mexico Horse Rescue at Walkin N Circles Ranch

North Central New Mexico's Equine Rescues

NAME & LOCATION	FOUNDED	# EQUINES	SOURCES	# STAFF	# VOL.	BUDGET	SERVICES
EQUINE SPIRIT SANCTUARY Ranchos de Taos, Taos County	2005	30	NMLB, owner surrenders	1 FT, 1 PT	20	\$120,000	Rehab, educational clinics, equine-assisted services, youth programs, adoption, sanctuary
HORSESHOE CANYON RESCUE RANCH , Youngsville, Rio Arriba County	2018	14	NMLB, owner surrenders, kill lots	2	0	\$70,000	Rehab, rehoming assistance, training, adoption, sanctuary
SKY MOUNTAIN WILD HORSE SANCTUARY , San Miguel County	2008	17	NMLB, roundups, other rescues	1 FT, 3 PT	4	\$212,000	Fertility control, sanctuary, youth program, ecosystem management
TAMAYA HORSE RESCUE San Ysidro, Sandoval County	2012	122	NMLB, owner surrenders	8	50	\$500,000	Rehab, training, trail riding, youth program
THE HORSE SHELTER Cerrillos, Santa Fe County	2000	95	NMLB, owner surrenders	8	82	\$1.16M	Rehab, training, adoption, sanctuary, resale shop in Santa Fe
New Mexico Horse Rescue at WALKIN N CIRCLES RANCH Edgewood, Santa Fe County	2002	70	NMLB, owner surrenders	4 FT, 5 PT	50-70	\$859,000	Rehab, training, adoption, demonstrations, resale shop in Edgewood

Findings

This section discusses four categories of stakeholder-identified needs: resources and capacity, free-roaming horse management, policy development, and community involvement.

Basis for Findings

The findings are based on interviews with and site visits to the study area's six licensed equine rescues. Rescue staff are uniquely qualified to speak to the needs of equines in New Mexico as they are immersed in the daily care of the state's most vulnerable horses, donkeys, and mules.

The findings were also informed by interviews with Pinu'u Stout, Director of Natural Resources for the Pueblo of San Felipe and Dr. Alexandra Eckhoff, DVM, NMLB veterinarian and equine rescue inspector. Mt. Taylor Mustangs, a New Mexico-based equine management consulting firm; and APNM's Equine program staff, also informed the findings below.

1. Resource and Capacity Needs

Numbers of Equines in Need

Stakeholders cite the sheer number of at-risk equines in New Mexico as a top challenge of the equine rescue community, both within the study area and statewide. In fact, total intake numbers at New Mexico licensed rescues are at historic levels, from about 250 ten years ago to over 430 today, according to WNCR Executive Director Mark Preiss.

Turmoil in the economy, an aging population, and rising costs for care all contribute to the immediate increase in number of equines in need. Many owners are one job loss or family illness away from being unable to care for their equines. "Finances are the number one reason for surrendering horses," says WNCR Immediate Past President Lauri Michael. "People sometimes don't know what they're getting into when they take in a horse," she explains.

The limited number of equine veterinarians providing care, distance to access care, transportation costs, and increases in veterinary medicine and service pricing also contribute to the number of equines in need. For example, a routine gelding procedure cost about \$150 in 2019, \$225 in 2021, and \$300–\$600 in 2025.¹⁰²

As in non-tribal communities, there are also neglected, abused, and abandoned horses in need of placement and care on tribal lands. Right now the only options for such horses is to become free-roaming, to be sold at auction and risk entering the slaughter pipeline, or to be taken in by one of the state's equine shelters.

Condition of Rescued Equines

Domestic, wild, and free-roaming horses often arrive at rescues in poor condition, and many require extensive veterinary care due to starvation, neglect, injuries, or abandonment.

One such horse was GB, taken in by HCRR. "GB was dumped at a kill lot," HCRR co-founder Tina Kleckner recalls. A kill lot is a pen where horses are held prior to being shipped for slaughter. "She had rope burns, and her quarter horse papers were stapled to her butt. We worked with her for three years. Now she's a love bug."

With time, care, and training, many of these equines, like GB, can be rehabilitated and adopted out to community members. A significant number of these horses require lifelong care by an organization due to age, health conditions, or trauma resulting from abuse.

Equine Rescue Capacity

The number of vulnerable equines in the state often exceeds the capacity of the licensed organizations that care for them. Most New Mexico rescues are at or over capacity, yet they are routinely asked to take in additional equines by community members, NMLB personnel, and, in the case of wild or free-roaming horses, by federal and tribal agency personnel.

The licensed organizations collaborate and often juggle to make room for equines at risk for abandonment or sale for slaughter. Incentivizing not-yet-licensed rescues to become licensed would expand the capacity of New Mexico's equine rescue network.

Additionally, many tribal communities lack the financial resources to build and staff an equine rescue. Making state resources available to tribal nations interested in establishing their own equine shelters would help unburden the state's licensed equine shelters, empower tribal communities, and keep more domestic horses from becoming free-roaming estrays that the state will inevitably need to manage.



Equines often arrive at rescues in poor condition. Luna, above, was found dodging traffic on I-40 east of Albuquerque. The filly fell out of the trailer and the driver did not stop to recover her. WNCR treated Luna's injuries and severe road rash, and is rehabilitating her for adoption.

Funding

Stakeholders cited inadequate and unpredictable funding as one of their top challenges, combined with rising operational costs such as feed.

"Costs have gone up, and hay cost has doubled," explains ESS founder and director Ruth Bourgeois, "but donations haven't gone up." Average feed cost per equine is \$5/day (\$1,825/year), not including nutritional and veterinary supplements. New Mexico's ongoing drought is reducing crop yields and driving up feed prices. As of March 2026, the entire state was under moderate to extreme drought conditions, according to the American Farm Bureau Federation.¹⁰³

In 2013, the State of New Mexico created the Equine Shelter Rescue Fund (ESRF), administered by the NMLB to provide grants to licensed equine rescues for the direct feed and care for at-risk equines in their care. It is funded via voluntary state tax refund contributions and occasional legislative appropriations. However, because appropriations have been rare and irregular, and the tax donations bring in minimal amounts of funding, the ESRF is dramatically underfunded and an unreliable resource.

Additionally, there is currently no government support for rescues seeking to maintain general operations or expand infrastructure and capacity to be able to take in more equines. Without such support, the state bears



Rescues rank equine intakes for their handleability, from unhandled to trained. Many of The Horse Shelter's rescues are coded red, needing lengthy rehab and training.

related costs anyway: via state agency involvement in addressing cruelty, abandonment, and estray cases; litigation against the state; vehicle collisions; and negative consequences on tourism and communities when equine solutions are lacking.

State funding is necessary to improve equine care in New Mexico and to sustain these improvements going forward. This funding is needed to expand critical services such as veterinary care, and for the services provided by licensed rescues.

State-funded veterinary care would increase access to care and affordability, while providing a mechanism by which veterinarians are guaranteed payment for their services.

State funding for licensed rescues would enable these organizations to increase capacity to care for the number of equines in need. Funding to rescues for veterinary care, feed, and training would help with rehabilitating and adopting out equines when possible. This funding would also enable rescues to offer a safety net for equines needing lifelong care.

Robust and reliable state funding for equine shelters would not only help existing rescues, it would also incentivize more rescues to become licensed. More shelters becoming licensed would help expand sheltering capacity and provide NMLB oversight to ensure better standards of care and greater accountability to the public.

CASE STUDY

Free-Roaming Horses of Sandoval County

“This humane, science-based fertility control program has reduced the herd’s annual reproduction by 76 percent.”

—Jayme
Catanach,
Community
Services Director,
Sandoval County

Sandoval County and contractor Mt. Taylor Mustangs, LLC have developed a humane, science-based program for horses roaming free in and around the community of Placitas, about 10 miles east of the Town of Bernalillo. Mt. Taylor Mustangs is a New Mexico-based organization that has provided humane, science-based management for wild and free-roaming horses on both public and private lands since 2004.

Herd Reduction

Between 2019 and 2025, this unique program has reduced the herd’s annual reproduction by an average of 76 percent using the immunocontraceptive Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP). Stabilizing the herd number has contributed to herd health and safety, community safety, and land health. It has also decreased community conflict over the horses.

Today, Placitas is home to over 175 horses roaming in 23 unique bands. The horses roam through neighborhoods, residents’ yards, on the roads, and in the surrounding open space. Had Sandoval County not implemented a herd management program with fertility control, the herd would have numbered over 305 horses in 2025.

Prior to program implementation, intense community conflict occurred regularly. This included litigation and even death threats between residents

The Sheriff’s Office produced a brochure to help residents avoid costly and dangerous collisions with free-roaming animals.

who like the horses and those who want them removed. Additional challenges included harassment of County officials and horses being hit by cars and killed on roads. Many horses were starving due to lack of forage and water, leading to some residents supplementally feeding the horses near roadsides and exacerbating collision risks.

In 2023 Sandoval County adopted a local ordinance prohibiting the feeding of free-roaming horses outside of very narrow exceptions.

To find humane solutions to human-equine conflict, Sandoval County also commissioned a task force, formed an advisory council, and surveyed local residents. See the “Free-Roaming Horses of Sandoval County” website for resources and program history.¹⁰⁴

PZP Treatment

PZP is an immunocontraceptive that vaccinates mares (female horses) against conception. Over three decades of research has demonstrated that PZP is effective, safe for pregnant mares and foals in utero, has minimal side effects, and does not pass through the food chain when a treated mare dies.

PZP treatment is the foundation for managing the Placitas horses to better balance the herd number with multifaceted community needs and the landscape on which these horses live. In 2024 Sandoval County extended the contract with Mt. Taylor Mustangs to include the free-roaming horses of Sandia Park, an East Mountain community.

This successful, humane management model may be implemented for free-roaming horse herds throughout New Mexico to protect horses, communities, and the health of the environment.



2. Free-Roaming Horse Management

Resource needs significantly affect the challenges facing free-roaming horses in New Mexico. Herds are losing habitat due to industry, development, and climate change, while continued reproduction often pushes populations beyond what the land can sustain. As forage and water become scarce, horses suffer poor health and starvation. At the same time, conflicts with landowners, agricultural interests, and public safety concerns, particularly near roadways, place both horses and people at risk and frequently lead to removal from the range.

Removed horses are typically unhandled and require extensive veterinary care and training to become adoptable. Many are unable to adjust to human interaction and therefore require lifelong care in free-roaming or sanctuary settings. Because of the growing number of horses and the space required for humane care, managing equines on the land where they roam, whenever possible, is the most sustainable option. “Quantity over quality of life is a critical issue,” says Karen Herman, SMWHS co-founder and director. “You can’t put a large number of wild or free-roaming horses in a corral or small pasture and expect them to thrive. Many of them need to roam.”

New Mexico is home to 23 Tribes whose lands often intersect with public and private lands across the state. Effective herd management must be developed in collaboration with interested Tribal entities, with the shared goal of humane management. A regional approach to management is useful to address the needs of Tribal communities and free-roaming horses when horses roam across tribal and non-tribal lands. Tribal nations often have more limited staffing and financial resources than state entities, which could impede their ability to implement herd management. To address this, the state should provide resources to interested Tribes on a case-by-case basis.

For many years, roundup and removal has been the primary management tool for free-roaming horses. Research suggests that sole reliance on this approach leads to increased breeding due to compensatory reproduction, necessitating more roundups.¹⁰⁵ Fertility control has proven to be both effective and economical for reducing herd numbers over time.



Free-roaming horses in Placitas graze in a resident's yard.

Treating a mare on the range with PZP can cost as little as hundreds of dollars per year (or less, if volunteers are enlisted), compared to thousands of dollars for roundup, removal, and processing of a single horse removed from the range. Shelter care costs for rounded-up horses may exceed \$5,000 per horse in the first two years alone.

Where free-roaming horse herd numbers exceed range capacity, horses, other wildlife, and ecosystems suffer. Selective removal of horses may be necessary. To support humane management, New Mexico should explore the creation of sanctuaries or preserves that provide lifelong care for free-roaming horses who cannot remain on their original range. These preserves could serve unadoptable horses, serve as tourism destinations in rural areas, accommodate relocated horse bands, and potentially include facilities where some horses are assessed and gentled for adoption if their temperament and health allow.

Without proactive, effective herd management, New Mexico's licensed equine rescues will be overwhelmed by the number of horses removed from the range. This would place additional strain on rescues due to the challenges of providing veterinary care and training for unhandled horses to prepare them for adoption, or lifelong care for those who cannot be trained. Recommendations to support the state's equine rescue network must include humane management solutions for free-roaming horses.

“The way we as humans take care of horses says more about us than it says about them.”

—**Pinu’u Stout**,
Director of Natural
Resources, Pueblo
of San Felipe

Photo by Heidi Baxter/APNM



Veterinarian Hilary Clayton (left) and Taos Pueblo members steady a horse to receive a dewormer at a 2025 equine wellness clinic.

Animal Protection New Mexico (APNM) partners with Tribes and Pueblos to develop humane, long-term effective and culturally appropriate solutions to the challenges in equine management and care for free-roaming, owned, and community equines alike.

These partnerships, both within the study area and beyond, focus on humane, proactive practices, such as mobile veterinary clinics, equine contraception, and feed assistance. The well-being of these communities, the horses, and the lands they are on are intertwined.

Wellness and PZP Clinics

The equine clinics can include gelding, vaccinations, hoof care, and health checks. In 2025, in partnership with the Taos Pueblo Warchief’s Office, APNM facilitated two community equine clinics in Taos Pueblo. In August, Dr. Hilary Clayton and Dr. Clara Maxam provided 37 equines with veterinary care, including vaccinations, dewormers, and health checks. This clinic also featured an educational talk with a Q&A session about basic equine care and preventative health.

At Taos Pueblo’s October clinic, 36 equines benefited from services such as teeth

floats, hoof trims, and vaccinations, as well as two gelding surgeries (castrations). Horses from the community pasture were also brought in to receive vaccinations and boost herd immunity. Veterinary care was provided by Dr. Andrea Gutierrez of Southwest Veterinary Services, Dr. Shannon Subasi of Los Alamos Equine Veterinary Services, and farrier Samuel Balsamo.

APNM has also arranged trainings in PZP equine contraception administration for communities interested in humanely managing free-roaming horse populations.

A Regional Approach

Horse population issues are regional. By necessity, they must be addressed across county, tribal, and state lines. Over the past two years, APNM has expanded its clinics throughout the state, including to southern New Mexico. In collaboration with the Las Cruces Horseman’s Association, in April of 2025 APNM facilitated an equine gelding and wellness clinic where 42 equines from 15 Las Cruces households received free or low-cost care.

In collaboration with tribal partners, equine wellness clinics have also reached

communities deeper within Navajo Nation, in both New Mexico and Arizona. These have included fall and spring wellness clinics in Pine Hill, New Mexico, in partnership with the Ramah Navajo Chapter Department of Natural Resources (RNC-DRN); fall and spring wellness clinics in Tuba City, on the western end of Navajo Nation in Arizona, in partnership with the Navajo Nation Veterinary Program (NNVP); gelding and PZP vaccine clinics in Window Rock, Arizona, and Shiprock, Tse Bonito, and Tohatchi, New Mexico, in partnership with the NNVP; and a vaccination clinic and educational talk at Pinedale, Arizona, and a hoof care educational clinic in Church Rock, New Mexico, in partnership with the Navajo Technical University.

Both the NNVP and the RNC-DRN are actively treating domestic mares with PZP vaccine.

Equine Protection Fund

An important part of APNM's work for equines throughout New Mexico is the Equine Protection Fund (EPF).¹⁰⁶ This program offers emergency feed assistance and payment of costs for humane euthanasia for suffering equines. Since the EPF launched in 2009, over 6,200 horses, donkeys, and mules have been directly helped.

During 2023, APNM delivered hundreds of thousands of pounds of feed worth \$69,286 to 11 Tribal communities: Nambé Pueblo, San Felipe Pueblo, Santa Clara Pueblo, Pojoaque Pueblo, Taos Pueblo, Kewa Pueblo, Zia Pueblo, Mescalero Apache, Ramah Navajo Chapter, Manuelito Navajo Chapter, and Rock Springs Navajo Chapter, assisting 628 equines.

Beyond this report's study area, another example of tribal/non-tribal collaboration involved Mescalero Apache. In 2025 the Tribe sustained severe flooding that closed roads and damaged infrastructure. APNM provided 34,400 pounds of alfalfa to feed 71 equines for 30 days, strengthening the state's disaster response capabilities.

Best Practices

These community-led efforts highlight several best practices in equine management. They respect tribal sovereignty and cultural values. They promote a

regional approach. And they utilize humane, science-based herd population management, rather than inhumane roundup and either lethal removal or transport to auction, where equines are at high risk of being bought by kill buyers and exported for slaughter. Taken together, these efforts strengthen the safety net to keep equines with their caretakers and out of the slaughter pipeline.

To learn more, contact Nina Eydelman, Chief Program & Policy Officer - Equine & Wildlife, nina@apnm.org.



Photo by Nina Eydelman/APNM

Attendees at a PZP training in San Felipe Pueblo learn to administer the contraceptive with a dart gun.



Photo by Victoria Murphy/APNM

San Ysidro clinic participants watch over an anesthetized horse recovering from gelding surgery. The clinic drew attendees from nearby Jemez Pueblo and Zia Pueblo.

3. Policy Needs

Improving equine welfare in New Mexico requires significant policy change. These include upgrading current statutes, developing new ones to address gaps in equine-related law, and strengthening enforcement and penalties. Currently, equine welfare is not defined in statute. Also lacking are policies that could spur equine workforce development. Addressing equine needs proactively will prevent suffering for horses, donkeys, and mules and improve conditions for them and the communities in which they live.

Standard of Care

Stakeholders agree that New Mexico needs an equine standard of care defined in statute. The statute should make abandoning equines illegal and provide the means for managing free-roaming horses on public lands. An equine standard of care would provide a universal bar for how equines are to be cared for and outline standards to which owners are held.

“We need a state-established standard of care for equines,” says Susan Hemmerle, director of THS. “Without clear minimum guidelines, it’s extremely difficult for rural law enforcement to hold neglectful owners accountable and enforce cruelty statutes.” She emphasizes that these standards should define the basics every equine deserves: adequate feed and water, proper shelter, and sufficient space to move freely. “For example, a horse cannot be confined to a pen as small as 6 by 10 feet,” Hemmerle explains. “Setting these minimum requirements is essential to protecting equine welfare and preventing suffering.”

Additionally, regulation is needed for unlicensed organizations claiming to be equine rescues; they must become licensed by the NMLB or face penalties. Legislation such as 2025’s HB 284 is required to provide a legal framework for managing free-roaming horses for their health and safety, for the health of the land, and for the safety of the surrounding communities. Statutes must outline well-defined penalties for violating the standard of care and provide clear enforcement mechanisms.

Interagency Collaboration

Enhanced interagency collaboration is needed to enforce statutes and improve equine care.



Farrier Dora Hebrock provides hoof care at ESS.

Cooperation between the NMLB, local law enforcement, and communities to educate horse owners on care required for equines is critical. Collaboration is needed to implement an equine standard of care, assist owners with compliance, and enforce the standard and penalties as needed.

Workforce Development

Policies promoting equine workforce development are a means to improve access to care while creating jobs. Incentives for veterinarians to practice in rural areas, and tuition assistance for veterinarians, vet technicians, and farriers, are examples of policies that would expand care for equines while offering career paths for New Mexicans. Training in herd management planning and PZP administration would be especially helpful in rural areas. The creation of training programs for students interested in working with equines through the statewide network of community colleges would further contribute to workforce development.



Every day is a work day for Mike Kleckner, 74, HCRR co-founder with his wife, Tina Kleckner. The rescue's remote Rio Arriba County location hinders staff recruitment.

"New Mexico rescues are at risk of sunseting once the current care providers are no longer physically able or present to care for the horses. This puts stress on other rescues because, by law, they are required to absorb horses from any licensed rescue that folds," explains NMLB rescue inspector Dr. Alex Eckhoff.



New Mexico faces a shortage of rural, equine, and large-animal veterinarians, and many of the state's practicing vets are nearing retirement.

Above: Dr. Dwight Hooton (left) makes a midnight call to treat HCRR resident Belle. Many rescues and horse owners relied on Dr. Hooton, who operated a mobile small- and large-animal practice. He gelded many stallions and treated over 220 equines in wellness clinics across the state. The beloved veterinarian passed away in 2024.



Equine workforce development can create a variety of jobs for New Mexicans, stimulating the north central region's economy. Careers include veterinary professionals, equine trainers, ranch managers and hands, herd management planners, equine-assisted therapy practitioners, PZP administration specialists, and more.

Above: A PZP training for the Pueblo of San Felipe, sponsored by APNM

CASE STUDY

Equine Spirit Sanctuary Youth Programs

"Horses are incredible teachers. They make people of all ages feel good."

—**Ruth Bourgeois**,
Director, Equine
Spirit Sanctuary

Founded in 2005, Equine Spirit Sanctuary (ESS) provides lifelong care to rescued horses, donkeys, and mules (and a llama named Tony). The organization also fosters connections between young people and equines through an array of programs for youth ages 5 to 18.

ESS's equine-assisted learning, therapy, and riding programs are based on the practices of PATH International, a national nonprofit formed in 1969 to promote equine-assisted services. ESS's programs are designed to foster awareness and to teach skills and teamwork. Youth receiving counseling for mental health needs and those experiencing homelessness have the chance to share time with equines in a safe, caring environment.

ESS offers hands-on programs that teach youth how to work safely with horses, build confidence, develop self-awareness, and learn how to be grounded so they can positively connect with horses. These valuable life lessons apply to any challenges the participants face in their daily lives. Equine-facilitated therapy is



Photos by Heidi Baxter/APNM

A youngster learns how to groom a horse.

offered for children with therapists from local behavioral health agencies. Equine-facilitated learning is offered to youth for skill-building in working with horses and others. These program sessions include grooming and leading horses, building relationships with horses, arts and crafts, and typically include riding.

Benefits of therapeutic riding for youth with physical disabilities are improved balance and coordination and motor skills, focus, enhanced mobility, core strength, and flexibility. ESS also hosts field trips for students to spend time with horses and plans to expand its "Read to the Donkeys" program. For many local youth, ESS provides their first chance to be around horses.

Through youth programs at ESS, abandoned, abused, and surrendered rescue horses gain a new life with positive attention and time with people. "Horses are so healing and so good for people," states Ruth Bourgeois, ESS director. "Horses are incredible teachers, and they make people of all ages feel good." Through all its programs, ESS offers a safe refuge for both youth and equines.

Equine Spirit Sanctuary is located in Ranchos de Taos, about 15 minutes from Taos Plaza. To learn more about ESS's youth programs and other services, reach out to ruth@equinespiritsanctuary.org.



Leading horses and riding are among the skills program participants, aged 5 to 18, learn at the Taos County sanctuary.

4. Community Change Needs

Fundamental change is required in New Mexico's communities to address the systemic causes of equine suffering and management challenges.

Ethic of Lifelong Care

"We have failed to generate an ethic of lifelong care for so many equines. Many horse owners state they have to get rid of their horse when they can no longer use it how they want to," says SMWHS director Karen Herman. "It's past time to act for what horses need."

An ethic of lifelong care for equines is needed to break the cycle of abuse, neglect, and abandonment that puts so many equines at risk today. Immediate reductions in breeding of domestic and free-roaming equines are needed to reduce the number of unwanted horses. Public education on the resources and time required to care for equines coupled with enforcement of standards for adequate care is necessary to decrease the need for horse rescue.

Public Education

Engaging communities, equine industry representatives, and equine interest groups would deepen understanding of the suffering of at-risk equines, the challenges of equine rescue, and the benefits of adopting rescue equines, thereby increasing homing options for horses, donkeys, and mules.

"We need more education and services to keep equines in their homes," advises THS Ranch Manager Traci Kipnes. "Most people don't want to give up their horses."

Additional resources, such as an equine care helpline, temporary feed support, and subsidized veterinary care, are ways to keep more equines cared for in their homes. Educating the public, legislators, and equine industry and interest groups about the connections between equine welfare and the health and safety of communities would strengthen both equine and community well-being.



Horses can live about 30 years, but New Mexico rescues see some owners discarding their animals at any age when they're no longer seen as useful. Above: WNCR's Spirit Tree honors equine residents who have passed on.



Young riders demonstrate their skills at a weekly THR rodeo. Teaching humane equine care and responsibility to the next generation is core to the organization's mission.

Best Practices in Equine Rescue

There are over 1,300 equine rescues and sanctuaries in the United States. Best practices have developed from their on-the-ground experience and partnerships with the veterinary and equine industries.

Organizational best practices center on providing an excellent environment, nutrition, veterinary and farrier care, and training for at-risk equines. These practices are designed to restore health to rescued equines and to secure permanent, caring homes. Organizational management practices are also necessary for rescues to maintain a strong foundation for serving equines.

Another necessary rescue model is the sanctuary or preserve where equines safely roam free in a designated area. This model generally provides required veterinary care and occasional feed to supplement pasture grazing but not training or adoption promotion.

Environment

Equines require shelter and a fenced area with room to move. Shelter should provide a place for them to move out of adverse weather conditions, and water should always be available. Visible fencing made from safe materials is needed. Corrals should be kept clean and free of potential hazards that could cause injury. To prevent breeding, separating the sexes until the males are gelded is required. Quarantine pens for new arrivals and sick equines are necessary to assess health and prevent disease.

An additional consideration for free-roaming and wild horses is room to roam; a minimum of 50 to 100 acres per horse offers a high-quality environment for them.

Nutrition and Veterinary Care

Equines require a quality diet tailored to their specific needs. Age, body condition, and medical issues are considerations when choosing feed and supplements for each equine. Individualized feeding protocols for those with special needs, such as pregnancy or recovery from starvation, are critical.

Equines require an initial veterinary assessment upon arrival to a rescue organization to identify health needs. Regular veterinary care for routine and acute needs as well as immunizations is necessary to restore and maintain their optimal health thereafter. Regular

farrier care is necessary to ensure good hoof health. An additional consideration for free-roaming and wild horses is the development of specialized protocols to provide veterinary and farrier care in a safe, humane way as often they cannot be handled.

Handling and Training

Equines require skilled, gentle handling to become acclimated to people for their health and safety and for the safety of those working with them. Positive, consistent training with clear boundaries is necessary to help them gain the skills needed to thrive, to be placed in a quality home, and, for many equines, to perform in a potentially new way, such as being a young person's riding horse.

Adoption and Rehoming

For equines for whom adoption is an option, an application and screening process is necessary. This process includes assessment of potential adopters, their ability to care for equines, skill level in handling the equine of their choice, and commitment to providing the equine with a home. A site visit to the potential adopter's facility is recommended. Adoption contracts should include a return clause to ensure the equine's welfare should the adopter become unable to care for the equine. For equines who are unadoptable to the public due to age or special needs, options that offer a permanent home are needed. Free-roaming and wild horses often require a forever home where they can roam with minimal human contact.

Organizational Best Practices

Rescues need an emergency plan to ensure the health and safety of the equines in their care should disaster occur; licensure by the NMLB requires it. These organizations also need strong operational and fiscal management, record-keeping practices, succession plans, and transparency. Collaboration between rescues helps equines and the organizations serving them in rescue efforts. Rescues require annual inspection and licensing by the NMLB to ensure the equines they serve are receiving quality care.

Taken together, all these practices provide a strong foundation by which rescues best serve the equines in their care and their communities.

Wild Herd Management

One of the most well-known models of humane herd management for wild horses is Assateague Island National Seashore, located in Maryland and Virginia.¹⁰⁷

There was a time when rounding up and removing some of the wild horses to limit herd size and environmental impact on this barrier island was considered. Roundups are costly, destroy the bonds within family bands of horses, and often leave horses in holding facilities with a poor quality of life.

Today, the wild horses are roaming Assateague Island healthy and free. Innovative research with the Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP) contraceptive vaccine, begun in 1988, has reduced the herd's reproduction. This research marked the first use of PZP to manage wild horse herds anywhere in the world.¹⁰⁸

The Assateague horses have remained free in numbers that are in balance with the island's fragile ecosystem, without roundups for over 30 years.

Each spring season, National Park Service employees deliver PZP treatments to Assateague mares via dart gun. This low-stress method has proven highly effective for improving herd and land health while reducing foaling. Herd management for wild horses that is grounded in science, humane treatment, and strong policy is effective, cost-sustainable, and may be replicated with other wild horse herds. This approach is a pathway for wildlife to live in balance with their environment.

At-Risk Domestic Horses

Founded in 2008 as the Unwanted Horse Coalition, the United Horse Coalition (UHC) is a national alliance of equine organizations that focuses on the



Photo by National Park Service

A band of wild horses roams a beach at Assateague Island National Seashore.

underlying causes that put horses at risk.¹⁰⁹ Through industry collaboration, the UHC promotes education on responsible equine ownership and options for at-risk horses and those transitioning to another purpose or owner.

UHC works to reduce the number of at-risk horses by educating the equine community on proper care and breeding, and available resources. Emphasizing prevention, UHC's Equine Lifeline helps equine caretakers access critical support before situations escalate into neglect, abandonment, or entry into the slaughter pipeline.

UHC also offers guidelines for rescues and sanctuaries, fundraising resources, and links to equine welfare, veterinary, and disaster assistance grants.

UHC maintains an Equine Resource Database of over 1,200 equine organizations across the U.S. that offer services from training and rehabilitation to owner-requested rehoming and end-of-life guidance. UHC is supported by the American Horse Council, national animal welfare organizations, and equine rescues and sanctuaries.

"Helping horse owners through hardship prevents surrender, neglect, and abandonment. Fewer surrenders means rescues can focus on their core missions."

—United Horse Coalition

Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to establish a strong, coherent statewide framework that responds to the stakeholder-identified needs previously described. Collectively, these reforms aim to shift New Mexico toward a proactive and coordinated system that prioritizes prevention of equine abuse and neglect, reduces reliance on crisis interventions, and ensures consistent humane treatment of equines across all contexts.

Legislative and Regulatory Reform

1. Codify a statewide equine standard of care.

- a. Define minimum standards for food, water, shelter, veterinary care, and humane handling of equines, as applicable to public and private settings.
- b. Explicitly define and prohibit equine abandonment and chronic neglect.
- c. Include provisions aimed at reducing breeding likely to lead to excess domestic equines at risk of entering the sheltering system.

2. Improve and expand the Equine Shelter Rescue Fund. Amend or replace the Livestock Code Section 77-2-32 NMSA 1978 to:

- a. Expand eligible uses of Equine Shelter Rescue Fund grants beyond feed assistance to include:
 - veterinary care,
 - sterilization and fertility control,
 - farrier services,
 - equine training,
 - adoption program services, and
 - surrender/intake diversion services that keep equines in their homes and reduce unwanted breeding (e.g., gelding, temporary feed support, and emergency veterinary care).
- b. Ensure grant criteria account for the increased operational costs and logistical challenges faced by rural equine shelters and rescues.
- c. Transfer administration of the Equine Shelter Rescue Fund from the New Mexico Livestock Board to the New Mexico Department of Agriculture or another state agency with greater administrative capacity to operate a statewide grant program.
- d. Establish a clear grant application process, eligibility criteria, reporting requirements, and accountability standards.

3. Strengthen enforcement authority and regulatory oversight over equine shelter facilities. Amend or replace the Livestock Code Sections 77-2-30 and 77-2-31 NMSA 1978 to:

- a. Develop clear enforcement authority, procedures, and penalties for unlicensed operation as a shelter.
- b. Ensure agencies responsible for enforcing equine welfare laws and regulations receive adequate staffing, training, and funding.

4. Create a comprehensive legal framework for free-roaming horse management. Amend or replace the Livestock Code Section 77-18-5 NMSA 1978 to:

- a. Establish new and improved standards and protocols for humane free-roaming horse management, science-based methodologies, and low-stress removal and relocation.
- b. Define appropriate state and local government authority and coordination mechanisms.
- c. Utilize trained experts to assess herd sizes and land carrying capacity and to develop and implement management plans.
- d. Require active and ongoing fertility control as a core component of long-term free-roaming horse management plans before large-scale removals can be pursued, with the exception of situations in which the welfare of horses is at immediate risk.
- e. Ensure that free-roaming horses removed from their habitat are placed only in humane long-term sanctuary or to qualified equine shelter facilities.

5. Support efforts to prohibit sale and interstate transport of domestic or free-roaming horses for commercial slaughter.

Investment in Equine Sheltering Infrastructure and Workforce

6. Increase capacity of licensed equine shelters.

- a. Provide recurring state funding to the Equine Shelter Rescue Fund, to create sustained support for equine shelter operations and services.
- b. Expand technical assistance, grant support, and partnership opportunities to promote the development of tribal equine shelters and programs.

7. Develop an equine and veterinary workforce pipeline.

- a. Facilitate local apprenticeship, internship, and career pathway programs connecting middle school, high school, and vocational students to careers in equine veterinary medicine, farrier services, equine care and sheltering, and humane law enforcement.
- b. Support initiatives that increase the availability of qualified equine veterinarians, farriers, and care providers in underserved and rural communities.

Photo by Nina Eydelman





The Horse & Rider Parade, honoring North American tribal horse culture and the human-equine relationship, at the final Gathering of Nations Powwow, Albuquerque, April 2026

Humane Free-Roaming Horse Management

8. Dedicate reliable state funding for humane on-range management.

- a. Provide state funding to state and local governments to initiate, implement, evaluate, and maintain humane free-roaming horse management programs within the established legal framework.
- b. Fund tribal nations seeking to implement humane free-roaming horse management programs on tribal lands.
- c. Fund training programs that equip local communities with skills in humane herd management, fertility control administration, and range capacity evaluation.

9. Establish and fund a State Free-Roaming Horse Sanctuary Partnership Program.

- a. Develop public-private partnerships with ranchers, landowners, tribes, and nonprofit organizations to provide long-term sanctuary pasture for removed free-roaming horses unable to return to the range, with oversight and enforcement identified in new statute (i.e., equine standard of care and legal framework for humane free-roaming horse management).
- b. Prioritize placements that maximize humane care, open-range movement, and public education opportunities.

10. Ensure that free-roaming horse management policymaking and governance incorporate inputs from experts in free-roaming horses, equine care and sheltering, and animal welfare, as well as from communities directly impacted.

Horse Industry Responsibility for Equine Welfare

Horses play a significant role in New Mexico's economy, culture, and daily life, including as companion animals, working partners, and participants in sport and entertainment. This broad use across multiple sectors creates a shared responsibility for their welfare.

Improving outcomes for equines in New Mexico cannot rest solely with government agencies and nonprofit equine rescues.

The broader equine industry has a central role in preventing neglect, supporting responsible ownership and breeding practices, and contributing to system-wide solutions. These include humane population management, adequate shelter capacity, effective rehoming pathways, and fostering a culture of lifelong care for equines.

Like other companion and working animals, horses depend entirely on human care and oversight. They should not be treated as disposable assets, but rather as sentient animals requiring consistent standards of care and long-term responsibility.

A durable and effective equine welfare system will require active participation from all sectors of the industry—including racing, rodeo, breeding, recreation, and working-equine communities—to ensure humane standards are upheld and solutions are implemented consistently across the full range of equine use in New Mexico.



Animal Emergency Management

Introduction

The newest and least developed animal services field covered in this report is also the most urgent. As New Mexico disasters increase in frequency and severity, incorporating animals in emergency planning, response, and recovery is critical.

"Including animals in disaster planning protects lives, supports safer evacuations, and strengthens community resilience."

—**Thomas Walmsley**, CEM,
Director, Bernalillo County
Emergency Management

Photo by Marko Georgiev/Getty Images



During Hurricane Katrina, an estimated 75,000 people refused to evacuate without their pets; untold numbers lost their lives. As many as 600,000 companion animals were stranded or died. The tragedy led to the landmark PETS Act of 2006, requiring that animals be included in disaster planning and response.

History of Animals in Disasters

For much of modern emergency management (EM), animals—especially companion animals—were treated as a secondary consideration in disaster planning. Local, state, and federal emergency response systems were designed primarily to address human life safety and critical infrastructure. Animal issues were often handled through ad hoc efforts by local animal control programs, humane organizations, and volunteers after an incident was already underway.

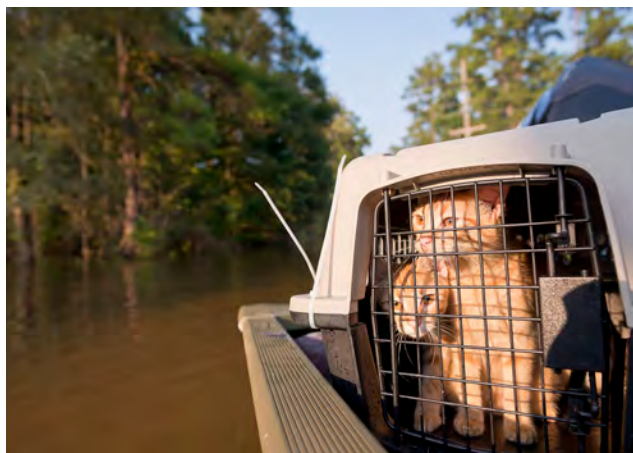
This approach repeatedly created avoidable risks: It increased human reluctance to evacuate, complicated sheltering operations, and led to animal welfare crises that could have been prevented through basic planning, agreements, and resource staging.

Past disasters accelerated the development of animal EM as a more structured operational discipline. During Hurricane Andrew in 1992, approximately 2,000 injured dogs and cats were euthanized for lack of places to shelter them.¹¹⁰ In response to the lessons learned from the disaster, the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps initiated an annual Veterinary Disasters course to enhance their preparedness for future incidents.

The PETS Act

A major change on the federal level came after 2005, when Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast. Rescue vehicles and emergency shelters often prohibited people from bringing their animals. The lack of companion animal rescue plans put many human lives at risk as owners refused to abandon their family pets; nearly 45 percent of those surveyed who stayed in their homes did so because of an animal.¹¹¹ Images of residents on rooftops clutching their pets, dogs swimming in murky waters, and cats hiding in wreckage flooded the media.

As this tragedy unfolded on national television, the U.S. government was prompted to reevaluate federal policy regarding companion animal evacuations during emergencies. In 2006 the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act was signed into law, requiring that states receiving FEMA assistance include pets in their evacuation and sheltering plans.¹¹² The PETS Act is an amendment to the Robert T. Stafford Act, the 1988 legislation governing



Cats being rescued by boat during a Texas flood.

disaster assistance and recovery in the U.S. (For more information, see the American Veterinary Medical Association's FAQ.¹¹³)

"If there is a silver lining in Hurricane Katrina ... it was that it changed how the country, to this day, considers the role of animals in our communities," Ana Zorrilla, CEO of the Louisiana SPCA, told NPR.¹¹⁴

Post-incident lessons from these and other disasters emphasized that animal issues are not separate from human outcomes. When households cannot evacuate with animals, or when animals are separated from owners during an evacuation, the results often include delayed evacuation, increased responder workload, and prolonged displacement. Over time, policy and practice evolved to better recognize the interdependence of human and animal safety during emergencies.

Animal EM Today

Twenty years after Katrina, the field has matured. EM's "Whole Community" approach has broadened to recognize animal needs. Animal emergency activities have been developed (see sidebar on page 117). FEMA's Resource Typing Library now includes animal-related categories and capabilities.¹¹⁵ Animal welfare organizations have created Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) and identified partners. Local and state Offices of Emergency Management (OEMs) have added animal annexes to emergency plans. (An annex is a supplemental section to an EOP that outlines standardized processes and protocols for responding to a variety of threats.)

Photo by Anthony Rathbun, AP Images for HWA

Organizational Leaders

Additionally, numerous national, state, local, and tribal organizations and coalitions have formed. For example, the National Alliance of State Animal and Agricultural Emergency Programs (**NASAAEP**) offers a series of 10 Best Practice Guides free of charge on their website. The 14 member organizations of the National Animal Rescue and Sheltering Coalition (**NARSC**) identify collaborative solutions to major human-animal emergency issues and cooperatively assist communities to prepare for and respond to disasters.

At the state level, organizations such as the Florida State Agricultural Response Team (**Florida SART**) support effective, coordinated, multi-agency incident response for the state's animal and agricultural sectors. California Community Animal Response Teams (**CalCARTs**) serves as an umbrella organization for stakeholder agencies, such as the California Department of Agriculture, and the local, county, and regional CARTs operating in the state.

At the local level, animal emergency planning and response is supported by CERTs (Community Emergency Response Teams), VOADs (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster), and other community networks. These groups train volunteers in response skills, deploy to assist professional responders, and educate their communities in preparedness. (See Resources, beginning on page 144, for more organizations and tools.)

An Evolving Field

As significant as these national, state, and local developments are, animal EM is still evolving. Serious limitations still exist.

Capability—especially for companion animals, as compared with commercial livestock—remains uneven and heavily dependent on local capacity. In practice, preparedness is strongest in areas with established partnerships and resources, and weakest in rural communities, small jurisdictions, and regions where animal services and emergency management have limited routine interaction.

In New Mexico, the need for consistent animal EM is increasingly urgent as communities face recurring wildfire, flooding, extreme heat, prolonged power outages, and other incidents that trigger evacuation, access restrictions, and displacement.

Animal EM At a Glance

Typical animal categories covered in government Emergency Operations Plans include:¹¹⁶

- **Household pets**
- **Assistance and service animals**
- **“Backyard livestock” (chickens, goats, sheep, pigs, etc.)**
- **Commercial livestock**
- **Working animals (K-9 units, ranch horses, etc.)**
- **Wildlife**
- **Captive animals (zoos, aquariums, research facilities, etc.)**
- **Confined animals (animal shelters, vet hospitals, boarders, etc.)**

Typical response activities include but are not limited to:¹¹⁷

- **Activation and rapid needs assessment**
- **Evacuation and transport**
- **Emergency sheltering**
- **Veterinary medical response**
- **Volunteer management**
- **Animal search and rescue (ASAR)**
- **Technical large animal rescue**
- **Animal/owner reunification**
- **Animal decontamination**
- **Response to animal disease emergencies**
- **Carcass management**

How Emergency Management Works

Emergency management is a field of extreme importance to public servants. Legislators, mayors, and other elected officials are ultimately responsible for emergency plans and disaster management within their jurisdictions. These duties are largely performed through delegation and assignment to multiple agencies and community partners.¹¹⁸

Everyday and Large-Scale Threats

Emergency management is a continuous, year-round function designed to reduce risk and manage incidents that threaten people, property, and community stability. It is not limited to large-scale disasters; many “everyday emergencies” require coordinated actions and can have impacts that rapidly overwhelm local animal services if not planned for. These include extended power outages, severe weather, water shortages, hazardous materials incidents, disease outbreaks, and sizable animal welfare seizures.

Acronyms Guide

Common and relevant EM acronyms include:

- AEM** Animal Emergency Management
- CART** Community Animal Response Team
- CERT** Community Emergency Response Team
- EM** Emergency Management
- EOC** Emergency Operations Center
- EOP** Emergency Operations Plan
- ESF** Emergency Support Function
- FEMA** Federal Emergency Management Agency
- ICS** Incident Command System
- NIMS** National Incident Management System
- OEM** Office of Emergency Management
- SART** State Animal Response Team

Under the National Response Framework, resources from dozens of federal agencies and private sector and non-governmental organizations are grouped into 15 different Emergency Support Functions (ESFs). In New Mexico, EM for both commercial livestock and companion animals falls under ESF 11, coordinated by the New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA).

Assistance Request Sequence

“Disasters begin and end locally,” explains Dan Heerding, Sandoval County Emergency Manager. City and county governments typically coordinate incident response and operate an Emergency Operations Center (EOC).

Emergency assistance is supplemental and sequential. Disaster declarations are granted when the severity and magnitude of the event’s impact surpass the ability of the local government to respond and recover. Should the disaster be so severe that both the local and state government’s capacity is exceeded, a federal disaster declaration may be issued, allowing for the provision of federal disaster assistance.

Incidents are commonly managed using Incident Command System (ICS) principles to establish a chain of command structure, clarify roles, coordinate resource requests, and define operational priorities.

EM stakeholder roles include the following:

- **Emergency managers** plan and coordinate disaster response; develop strategies, policies, and resources for their jurisdictions; and collaborate with related agencies.
- **Responders** execute response on the ground, provide direct assistance to victims and affected communities, and often receive specialized training. They can be professionals (paramedics, EMTs, firefighters, law enforcement officers, ACOs, HazMat technicians, etc.) or trained volunteers.
- **Animal welfare representatives** typically include animal shelters, animal control officers, veterinarians, volunteers, and rescues.

Emergency Management’s Four Functions

A common way to understand EM is through four overlapping functions:



Animal rescue (top left) often gets the most public attention, but animal EM can also include transport, emergency shelter, veterinary care, and food and water distribution for animals left behind.

When local needs exceed capacity, authorities can request assistance from local partners, the state, other states, and/or national orgs with field response teams.

- **Mitigation:** actions that reduce long-term risk
- **Preparedness:** planning, training, agreements, exercises, and resource staging that enable a faster, safer response
- **Response:** immediate actions to protect life and stabilize the incident (evacuations, temporary animal sheltering, animal rescue support, reunification of families, logistics, and public information)
- **Recovery:** restoring services and addressing longer-term needs (reunification completion, temporary housing, veterinary follow-up, cleanup, and after-action improvements)

Animal services intersect with all four functions:

- During **mitigation**, animal services help reduce risk to animal care facilities by, for example, readying generators, improving resilience to flooding, or “hardening” a property against fire.
- During **preparedness**, animal services participate in local planning, develop procedures and EOP annexes, build mutual aid agreements, identify

emergency holding facilities, stage supplies, train staff and partners, and conduct exercises.

- During **response**, roles include evacuation support, temporary sheltering, reunification, surge management, animal rescue, and coordination with veterinary and other partners.
- During **recovery**, animal services support the completion of animal/owner reunification and community stabilization, especially for households displaced by housing loss or infrastructure disruption.

Clear public messaging during an incident is essential: it reduces self-deployment, channels volunteers appropriately, and directs donated goods to staging locations where they can be managed effectively.

Owner Responsibility

Preparedness is a shared responsibility of residents and professionals. While the PETS Act requires pets’ inclusion in disaster response, owners remain responsible for their animals. “EM personnel can assist residents,” says Heerding, “but we can’t do it for you.”

North Central Region's Hazards and Operational Realities

This report focuses on one region of New Mexico, with its own unique hazard profile. However, local disasters can have statewide, regional, and even national and international consequences.

For example, the 2024 train derailment and fire along the northwest New Mexico–Arizona border prompted evacuations and closed a 50-mile stretch of Interstate 40. The halt in rail and ground traffic affected not only regional communities and commerce but also shipping in distant ports. More than 40 agencies were involved in the response.¹¹⁹

Because of these interconnections, this section of the report, while focusing on the study area, also notes characteristics of the state's broader animal-related EM system.

Hazard Profile

New Mexico communities face a diverse hazard profile that affects animal services in predictable ways. Wildfire and flooding—the main threats in the north central region—are also major statewide drivers of evacuation and displacement. The state also experiences severe storms, extended power outages, extreme heat and cold, water scarcity and water-quality issues, and human-caused incidents such as transportation accidents and hazardous materials events.

In addition to declared disasters, New Mexico jurisdictions must plan for animal-related incidents that can present as emergencies even without formal declarations. These can include large cruelty and hoarding seizures, facility failures at shelters or rescues, and zoonotic disease events (such as New World screwworm and Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza) that create quarantine, depopulation, or veterinary surge demands. These incidents reduce baseline resilience, strain staffing and shelter capacity, and limit the ability to scale during disasters.

Operational Realities

In addition to New Mexico's varied geography and vast land area, the state's infrastructure and socioeconomic realities are operationally significant. To begin with, disasters stress existing systemic disparities and therefore disproportionately affect marginalized,



Photo by Mattie Allen/Española Humane

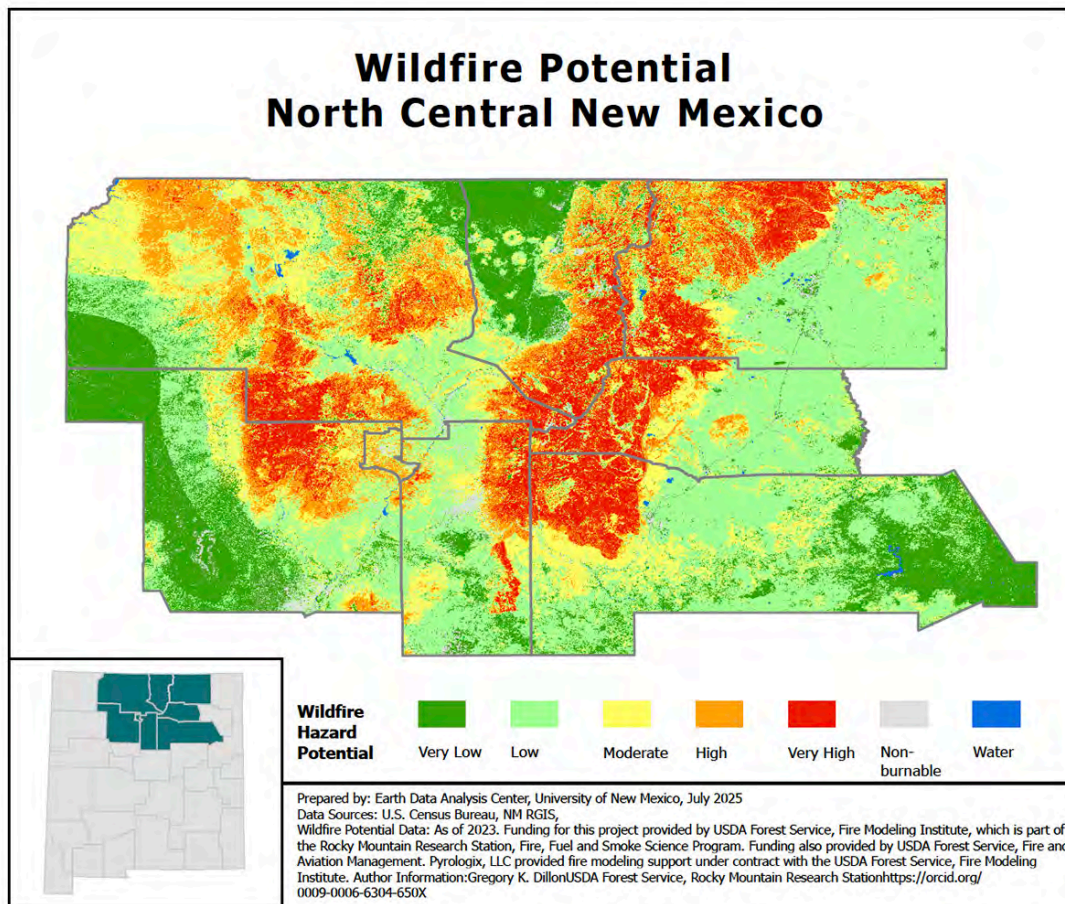
Disasters can impact communities far from the affected area, highlighting the need for regional solutions.

Above: Canine refugees from Ruidoso fires and floods find safe haven at Española Humane, 200+ miles to the north.

underserved communities. The New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (NMDHSEM) has identified populations most vulnerable to disaster impacts. Statewide these include households experiencing economic hardship, aging individuals, persons with limited English proficiency, those with disabilities, those with limited transportation, and families reliant on agriculture and tourism—industries that often involve animals and are especially vulnerable to disaster impacts.¹²⁰ Most of the north central region, like the rest of the state, is identified as LIDAC (Low Income and Disadvantaged Communities), as reported in the *New Mexico Climate Action Plan* (2025).¹²¹

Stakeholders also noted the vulnerabilities of rural and tribal communities in disaster readiness and response. Both can involve households with multiple species, longer transport distances, limited holding capacity, and fewer veterinary options.

Additionally, tribal and non-tribal jurisdictions may intersect during response operations, increasing the need for clear agreements, access expectations, and reimbursement pathways established before an incident.



Animal Impacts

Disasters amplify the daily challenges faced by the animal services industry, described earlier in this report. Across incidents, animal impacts often expand quickly as evacuations widen, pets are displaced, and animal care resources are diverted or damaged. Complicating matters, “animals are often a highly emotional topic of discussion in disasters, and inaccurate information can spread quickly,” explain the editors of *Shelter Medicine*.¹²² Effective communication channels and protocols are critical, as in all incident management scenarios.

The net effect is that animal emergency management must be approached as both a preparedness function (planning, training, agreements, equipment) and a logistics problem (transport, sheltering, staffing, communications), not just rescue. New Mexico’s size, rural character, and tribal jurisdictions heighten coordination challenges, making it essential to

manage animal emergencies as a planned, resourced, and integrated operational function, rather than an ad hoc crisis response.

Prioritizing Preparedness

The time to prioritize emergency preparedness is now. Disasters are increasing in severity and frequency, as demonstrated by the dramatic increase over recent years in billion-dollar weather and climate disasters affecting the United States. The 1980–2024 annual average was nine events (CPI-adjusted); during the most recent five years (2020–2024), the annual average skyrocketed to 23 (CPI-adjusted).¹²³ New Mexico’s wildfire disasters are among these billion-dollar events.

Animal EM as a field is still developing; New Mexico stakeholders identified significant service gaps and needs, described next in “Findings.” Collaboratively addressing them will strengthen both emergency preparedness and daily operations.

Findings

The findings below fall into three categories of stakeholder-identified needs: resources and capacity, policy and coordination, and community involvement.

Basis for Findings

The findings in this section are based on stakeholder interviews and practitioner input across emergency management, animal control and shelter operations, veterinary services, national disaster-response organizations, and state agriculture coordination. The findings were also informed by review of existing city, county, tribal, and organizational emergency plans and lessons from after-action reports shared by participants. Input reflects both day-to-day operational constraints and surge conditions experienced during evacuations, wildfire and flooding incidents, and facility-level emergencies.

1. Resource and Capacity Needs

Stakeholders frequently cited resource and capacity needs that extend beyond the north central region to include other regions and/or the entire state. Resources include EM assets, such as equipment and holding facilities, as well as personnel, training, and infrastructure.

Regional Capability

New Mexico stakeholders on the ground report that animal emergency management capability is uneven across the state, often depending on a small number of local assets and personnel. Interviewees identified pockets of stronger preparedness, but many areas lack redundant capacity to support evacuations and displacement at scale, particularly in regions with limited shelter infrastructure.

EM Staffing

Emergency management staffing levels in New Mexico are lean. Many local OEMs have just one or two employees, limiting planning bandwidth and follow-through. Many EM functions operate with minimal staffing while balancing planning, grants, and response responsibilities.

Under these conditions, animal issues are often deferred unless partners provide ready-to-implement solutions. As one New Mexico emergency manager



Photo by Aztec Animal Care & Control

State animal EM assets, such as Aztec's disaster relief trailer (above), should be identified in a vetted, statewide resource directory outlining request pathways.

put it, "We *do* talk about animal response, but we constantly have to triage."

Additionally, EM sees high turnover due to irregular schedules, long hours, resource limitations, exposure to trauma, and other stressors inherent in the field.

State Resource Directory

Stakeholders identified the essential operational need for a consistently maintained, statewide, state-vetted directory of animal emergency resources paired with a standardized request pathway.

Several jurisdictions maintain response equipment and trained personnel. For example, an initial stakeholder survey identified the following animal-related assets:

- Aztec Animal Care & Control (San Juan County) has an AKC Pet Disaster Relief trailer equipped with animal care, cleaning, and administrative supplies, and equipment such as a tent and computer printer.
- Bernalillo County Animal Care Services has a fully equipped emergency sheltering trailer, 2 livestock trailers, animal collection vehicles, animal handling equipment, 2 large trucks, food, livestock pens, crates, hoses, and sanitation equipment.
- Doña Ana County has a cache of portable kennels for emergency sheltering and a large disaster relief vehicle equipped with kennels and a surgery suite.



Emergency shelter for rescued, evacuated, and displaced animals during California's deadly Camp Fire in 2018. Sheets cover the crates to keep the animals calm.

- Española Humane has transport vehicles.
- Humane Society of Lincoln County (Ruidoso) has emergency preparedness procedures, wire crates and hard-shelled carriers, feeding supplies and is in the process of obtaining an emergency supplies trailer and a van to pull it.
- Los Alamos County has a 16-foot ProPak CAMET with crates, animal care and control supplies.
- Santa Fe Animal Shelter has animal transport vehicles, including a mobile adoption RV and a Sprinter van.
- Several shelters can provide limited kennel space for displaced animals, crates, carriers, pet food, volunteers, and other assistance.

These assets (and others yet to be identified) are valuable resources for New Mexico's animal response capability. However, awareness of what is available and how to request it remains inconsistent and often relationship-dependent.

A statewide resource directory of animal response assets, paired with defined request pathways, would benefit animal response across New Mexico.

Animal Holding Facilities

Animal control officers, tribal officials, and other stakeholders cited northern New Mexico's insufficient animal holding and sheltering options for both routine overflow and disaster surge. Limited "receiving" capacity outside major population centers constrains

evacuation outcomes, prolongs displacement, and increases strain on already-full shelters. Even the region's largest shelter, Santa Fe Animal Shelter and Humane Society, lacks immediate capacity to assume regionwide animal disaster response.

Part of disaster preparedness includes identifying potential locations for emergency animal sheltering that may house dogs, cats, goats, chickens, pet birds, and other small animals people may have as part of their household. This could be a fairground, community center, barn, or empty warehouse that has electricity and water available. Operation of an emergency animal shelter involves animal welfare professionals, government officials, veterinarians, and volunteers. Intake procedures, daily operations, reuniting animals with their owners, rehoming, and wrapping up temporary housing are part of the planning process. This type of housing plan must be aligned with larger disaster plans for the area and is why it is so important for animal welfare and animal service agencies to be part of their local office of emergency management.

Shelter for displaced animals often happens on an ad hoc basis. For example, during the 2024 Ruidoso South Fork Fire, the New Mexico Companion Animal Network (NMCAN), a statewide coalition of shelter leaders, took action in real time. Via the group's email list and personal contacts, they identified which local shelters could take in the Ruidoso area's displaced puppies, kittens, and/or adult animals and how many, and shared this information with Ruidoso's shelter.

A statewide resource directory that includes a list of pre-determined holding locations with the necessary equipment and personnel, including local animal shelters able or likely able to shelter animals from disaster areas, is essential.

Large-Animal Evacuation

Large-animal evacuation support remains a recurring gap—particularly in transport, staging, and appropriate temporary holding infrastructure. Stakeholders described a pattern of identifying space but lacking the equipment, logistics, and trained staffing to operate sites safely and effectively (containment, water, feed planning, and handler support).

Animal EM Training

Stakeholders can benefit from animal-related training in areas including:

Emergency Managers:

- Human-animal bond¹³²
- Animal EM best practices¹³³

Responders:

- Animal search and rescue (large animal, swiftwater, etc.)¹³⁴
- Species-specific handling¹³⁵

Animal Shelters & Rescues:

Basic FEMA courses:¹³⁶

- Intro to Incident Command System (IS-100.c)
- Intro to National Incident Management System (IS-700.b)
- Animals in Disaster: Awareness and Preparedness (IS-10.a)
- Animals in Disaster: Community Planning (IS-11.a)

Other:

- Evacuation and emergency sheltering¹³⁷
- Review of NM state and local EOPs¹³⁸
- Participation in exercises and tabletops

Volunteers:

- Basic FEMA courses (above) & CERT Basic Training¹³⁹
- The Role of Voluntary Organizations in EM (IS-288.a)
- NMDHSEM Community Emergency Response Teams¹⁴⁰

Animal Owners:

- Emergency preparedness¹⁴¹

See also “Animal Emergency Management” in Resources.



Photo by Nikki Richter/We Animals

Many New Mexico families keep farmed animals as part of their household economy and cultural heritage. Evacuation, transport, and sheltering of these animals require logistical expertise and species-specific handling and care. Above: Animal control officers maneuver a 600-pound pig into a transport trailer during a California wildfire response.

Rural areas especially need more support to manage backyard livestock evacuation, transport, and sheltering. Often farmed animals are not trailer-trained and the typically slow and challenging evacuation process adds stress to the animals and can put responders at risk. Evacuation routes can also be scarce; for many rural areas, there is only one way in and out.

Large animal response is often ad hoc. Stakeholders cited examples such as when the 2024 South Fork Fire threatened Mescalero Apache Tribal lands. At the Tribe's request, a Los Alamos area veterinarian secured 100 crates from Los Alamos County Animal Shelter and drove them to Mescalero so the community's pigs could be moved out of harm's way. The veterinarian also delivered chicken and goat feed to nearby Capitan.

Assistance partnerships and request pathways established in advance would improve response speed and effectiveness.

Animal Shelter Preparedness

Animal shelter emergency operations planning and facility evacuation planning are inconsistent. Some shelters and rescues lack current or any EOPs, evacuation triggers, continuity planning for power and water disruptions, and/or pre-identified temporary sheltering sites.

Stakeholder Training

Interviewees cited the need for training for multiple EM stakeholders in a variety of areas. Responders can benefit from training in animal evacuation, animal rescue, and species-specific handling and care. Animal shelters can benefit from basic training on the Incident Command System; emergency planning; and evacuation, emergency sheltering, and reunification protocols. Volunteers can benefit from training required for FEMA-resource-typed capabilities, such as Sheltering Team and Reunification Specialist. Owners need training on how to prepare their family, including their animals, for emergencies.

2. Policy and Coordination Needs

Animal EM is often implemented as a patchwork of functions rather than as a planned, integrated system. Establishing partnerships, protocols, and formal agreements in advance strengthens disaster readiness and response for New Mexico communities.

A Planned, Not Patchwork, System

Animal response is often dependent on ad hoc coordination and personal networks, which increases risk, slows response, and creates inequities across communities. Recommended partnerships (such as transport, fosters, veterinarians, equipment providers, sister shelters, and trained volunteers) are often not identified or developed in advance.

Connecting Animal Services and EM

Local emergency managers and local animal services are not consistently connected during “blue sky” (calm, non-disaster) periods, weakening incident integration. “Emergency managers and animal welfare groups work toward the same outcome: to reduce loss of life,” write Sarah DeYoung and Ashley Farmer, authors of *All Creatures Safe and Sound*. “But there is often a lot of tension and conflict about how to arrive at that outcome.”¹²⁴

Common tensions can include territoriality in crisis management, degree of adherence to protocol and top-down command, taking on more animals than capacity allows, and failing to use available resources.¹²⁵ Emergency managers cite disruptions due to well-meaning participants’ unfamiliarity with ICS and other standard protocols.



The New Mexico Department of Agriculture offers technical large animal rescue trainings using a horse mannequin.

“If organizations, including those that manage animals, do not work together before a disaster, they are less likely to work well together and trust one another during the disaster,” say DeYoung and Farmer.¹²⁶ Where integration is strong, it typically results from deliberate relationship-building and participation in planning and exercise activities.

Veterinary Integration

Veterinary surge and animal-care staffing are limited and inconsistently integrated into emergency planning. Interviewees described situations in which qualified responders were not integrated into operations and noted broader constraints tied to veterinary shortages and workforce challenges that are amplified during disasters.

The New Mexico Agriculture Livestock Incident Response Team (NM ALIRT) responds to biosecurity and livestock disease threats. However, the state lacks a dedicated veterinary emergency team for companion animals and other non-commercial-livestock species (see Texas Veterinary Emergency Team case study on page 131). Often emergency shelter personnel have no veterinary or handling knowledge of the species being sheltered.

Reunification

Animal owners should have an emergency evacuation plan for themselves and their family pets, working animals, and/or backyard livestock. However, rapid-onset threats like wildfire and flooding, and other complications, can result in people being separated from their animals.

Reunification is a persistent operational challenge during evacuations and access restrictions. Stakeholders described repeated issues related to owner–animal separation, documentation gaps, and limited mechanisms to support caretaking when residents cannot return, particularly for animals left behind under access restrictions.

In these situations, emergency responders and animal welfare professionals working together can photograph, scan, tag, and post rescued animals so they can be reunited with their families.

Following Hurricane Katrina and other disasters, animal groups from across the U.S. came to the affected areas and took animals back with them without efforts to reunite them with their families. This practice creates more heartache for victims of the disaster, many of whom have lost everything. Keeping displaced animals close to the affected area is critical for reunification.

Mutual Aid Agreements

Mutual Aid Agreements (MAAs) and reimbursement mechanisms are often not established in advance, delaying deployment and limiting participation. Stakeholders emphasized that uncertainty about who can deploy, who pays, and how costs will be tracked can constrain response, especially during prolonged incidents requiring weeks of staffing and supplies.

Tribal/Non-tribal MOUs

Tribal/non-tribal coordination in the north central region is often based on informal understandings rather than written agreements. Informal coordination may work in small incidents but becomes increasingly challenging as incidents scale and documentation, access, and reimbursement become more significant.

Emergency management’s Whole Community approach accounts for different languages, cultures, vulnerabilities, and access and functional needs. Partnering with tribes, an important part of upholding this approach, complies with legal mandates, strengthens regional resilience, incorporates valuable indigenous knowledge, and ensures tribal cultural resources and sacred sites are protected. Identifying existing models can help in developing new ones. For example, Bernalillo County OEM has MOUs with



Photo by vichinterlang/Stock

Reunification of animals with their owners is one of the most important parts of animal response. Above: A man and his dog are reunited after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The owner posted flyers of his missing companion.

Sandia, Isleta, and Laguna Pueblos. Best practices for engagement recognize tribal sovereignty and establish agreements using legal counsel with tribal partnership experience. “Engage early, often, and equitably,” advises Kymmie Scott, board secretary of the New Mexico Association of Emergency Management Professionals and a tribal relations specialist with Tidal Basin Group.¹²⁷

3. Community Change Needs

Residents and volunteers play key roles in effective animal disaster response.

Owner Preparedness

Owner preparedness and owner responsibility are decisive drivers of outcomes for both households and responders. Common gaps include transport planning, accessible veterinary records, proof of ownership, medications, and longer-duration supplies, especially when conditions require repeated relocation.

Residents play a critical role in reducing animal suffering and operational strain by maintaining evacuation plans, transport strategies, vaccination and medical records, and reunification tools (microchips, tags, current photos).

According to a nationally representative survey, 83 percent of pet owners reported living in a community threatened by natural disasters, and while 90 percent of them said they would evacuate with their pet, only 46 percent had actual preparedness plans in place.¹²⁸

Co-located Emergency Sheltering

Co-located sheltering is expanding, but community expectations and operational guidance remain inconsistent. In 2024, in New Mexico the American Red Cross began allowing co-location of humans and animals in mass shelters (meaning housed near each other but in separate areas; see endnote for the term's distinction from "co-sheltering," used in domestic violence services).¹²⁹ As communities increasingly adopt the practice of co-locating pets near human emergency sheltering operations, practical constraints require defined roles, protocols, and partner support to ensure safety and scalability.

Volunteers and Donations

Volunteer and donation convergence can create friction without structured channels and early public information. New Mexico Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (NM VOAD) advises would-be helpers to check with authorities before sending donations or going to an affected area: "Until a need has been identified and the local community impacted has requested support, volunteers should not enter."¹³⁰

Without volunteer reception processes and donation staging plans, well-intentioned public support can disrupt operations and increase responder workload. Karen Medicus, a former shelter director and emergency responder, worked the Hurricane Andrew response in Florida, when people brought truckloads of unsolicited food, blankets, and supplies to Metro-Dade animal services. "We did not have space or resources to sort these items, and they piled up outside," Medicus recalls. "It rains most afternoons in Miami and bags of dry pet food turned to mush, which created a problem with rats."¹³¹

NM VOAD advises, "Be patient. Recovery lasts a lot longer than the media attention. There will be volunteer needs for many months, often years, after the disaster."



Service Animals

A service animal is defined as an animal "individually trained to do work or perform tasks for a person with a disability."¹⁴² Most service animals are dogs. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), service dogs must almost always be allowed to stay with their owners, including in an emergency shelter that otherwise prohibits animals or co-locates them separate from the human area.

Service dogs are rigorously trained and can cost between \$10,000 and \$50,000. Many programs exist to offset the expense.

Newer ADA provisions also allow miniature horses to be recognized as service animals. Where reasonable, they are to be treated the same as service dogs.

Pets, therapy animals, and emotional support animals (ESAs) are not ADA-recognized service animals, although ESAs are covered under the Fair Housing Act.

Learn more from the New Mexico Governor's Commission on Disability.¹⁴³

“Wildlife has deep cultural meaning for everyone, tribal and non-tribal, historically and today.”

—**Matthew Miller**,
Executive Director,
New Mexico
Wildlife Center

Photo by LEWF



Dr. Kathleen Ramsay, a.k.a. the “Bear Doc,” cares for an orphaned cub at Cottonwood Rehabilitation, near Española. Ramsay has treated over 700 bears over the past 40 years.

Although wildlife falls beyond the scope of this report, no discussion of New Mexico animal emergency response would be complete without mentioning these leaders in wildlife conservation and rehabilitation.

Land of Enchantment Wildlife Foundation

Despite her nickname, Dr. Kathleen Ramsay provides veterinary care to many more species than the American black bear, New Mexico’s state animal. Ramsay and four others co-founded the Land of Enchantment Wildlife Foundation (LEWF) in 2012.¹⁴⁴ The nonprofit organization’s three-pronged mission is to provide support to wildlife rehabbers across New Mexico, to rehabilitate bears and other wildlife, and to provide wildlife education to local communities.

Ramsay’s own program, Cottonwood Rehabilitation, joined LEWF in 2024. It is New Mexico’s only rehabber of bears.

Cottonwood is also licensed to rehabilitate birds and other mammals, such as elk. A foster mom elk named ISH, who would not have survived in the wild, has helped raise numerous elk calves, such as Cinder, rescued during the 2022 Calf Canyon/ Hermits Peak Fire (see photo on cover). At 25 years, ISH is the oldest elk in captivity.

LEWF’s wildlife education program connects communities to nature through hands-on learning at local events. Staff and volunteers use pelts, skulls, footprints, and live birds to make ecology real for all ages. For example, meeting a live red-tailed hawk, which can kill a plague-infected squirrel and not get sick, transforms understanding by revealing natural animal interactions and relationships. “People may want to kill snakes, but then you’ve taken out rodents’ natural predators,” which can lead to overpopulation, disease, and ecological imbalance, Ramsay explains. This approach encourages respect, coexistence, and informed decisions about wildlife.

LEWF also co-hosts the annual Bear Festival and Eat Like a Bear Dinner each August in Los Alamos with the Pajarito Environmental Education Center (PEEC).

LEWF supports New Mexico’s wildlife rehab community with grants, veterinary services, animal transport, supplies, and volunteers. Organizations helped include the Santa Fe Raptor Center, Desert Willow Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, Gila Wildlife Rescue, Hawks Aloft, Snake Rescue, Wildlife Rescue Inc. of New Mexico, and the New Mexico Wildlife Center (NMWC). Ramsay founded NMWC in 1986 as a rehabilitation center for injured birds.

New Mexico Wildlife Center

Celebrating 40 years of operation in 2026, NMWC evolved to treat all species of wildlife in the state.¹⁴⁵ “The Center is the go-to place for wildlife in New Mexico,” says Executive Director Matthew Miller. Its mission is to protect wildlife through rehabilitation, conservation, education, and public engagement. The Center employs a staff of 14 full-time and part-time employees, supported by 100 volunteers.

Licensed at both the federal and state levels, NMWC provides veterinary medical care and rehabilitation free of charge to wildlife brought in by members of the public (90 percent of admissions) as well as by state, tribal, and federal partners. The organization fields calls from across the state, including from emergency responders and animal control agencies, whose staff are often trained to handle domestic animals but not necessarily wildlife, such as bobcats, raccoons, rattlesnakes, and many more species.

New Mexico’s premier wildlife rehab facility, the hospital is led by certified wildlife veterinarian Dr. Ashley Kramer and a team of certified rehabilitators, interns, and volunteers. Each year, they treat roughly 1,000 injured, ill, or orphaned animals representing more than 160 species, including sandhill crane, gray fox, porcupine, and many more. Admissions increased 17 percent from 2024 to 2025 alone. Since its founding, NMWC has cared for over 31,000 individual animals spanning 260 species, many of them on the *Species of Greatest Conservation Need* list.

The hospital has a full surgical suite, digital x-ray imaging, in-house pharmacy, diagnostic capabilities, three species-specific ICU rooms, a quarantine unit, 30 outdoor pre-release and flight training enclosures, and, new in 2025, the state’s only pre-release enclosure for rehab of aquatic species. The facility is also a learning space for K-12 students from around the state as well as a providing professional training for interns from New Mexico and across the country.

NMWC collaborates with the state Dept. of Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to return healthy animals to the wild. Its release rate exceeds 60 percent, higher than the national rehab average. The Center is also a member of the State Wildlife Action



Photo by NMWC

Wildlife rehabilitator Caroline Cohen is part of a veterinary team that treats over 1,000 wild animals each year.

Plan implementation committee.

Education is central to the Center’s work. Through on-site visits and outreach programs in schools, libraries, and community events, NMWC connects people with wildlife across the state. In 2025 the education team delivered 547 presentations reaching more than 11,000 people.

NMWC provides its veterinary care and rehab work free of charge, benefitting New Mexico industries such as tourism and education, and public services such as animal control, public health, and public safety. Compared to companion animal welfare, wildlife receives little state funding, mostly from competitive, non-recurring grants from the Economic Development Dept. and the Dept. of Wildlife. Over 90 percent of NMWC’s revenue comes from private contributions.

In the face of climate change and growing human population, “we’ll be interacting more with wildlife,” Miller predicts. “It is a cause that unites communities across all economic, political, cultural, and societal backgrounds.” To increase its capacity for care, in 2025 NMWC announced its new Master Site Plan and capital campaign, kicked off by a local bequest.

Best Practices in Animal Emergency Management

Best practice in New Mexico requires treating animal disaster preparedness and response as a core emergency management and public safety function, not a volunteer add-on.

A Regional, Cross-Jurisdictional Approach

Stakeholders consistently described a state in which capacity is uneven, local OEMs are often one- or two-person operations, and animal response remains too dependent on ad hoc relationships. Because local systems can be quickly overwhelmed, an effective New Mexico model must assume regional mutual aid, cross-jurisdiction coordination, and rapid escalation from the outset rather than assuming each community can manage independently.

For New Mexico, the most credible path forward remains incremental and operational. Rather than creating an immediate new bureaucracy, stakeholders can expedite animal EM improvements via shared tools, regular meetings, joint exercises, formalized relationships, and a coalition-style coordination model that strengthens existing agencies and capabilities.

Companion Animal vs. Livestock Response

Planning should distinguish between companion-animal response and livestock or equine response, because the operational needs, authorities, and available resources are not the same. Interviewees repeatedly indicated that New Mexico is generally better prepared on the commercial livestock side, while household-pet and backyard livestock evacuation, temporary sheltering, reunification, and veterinary surge remain less developed. At minimum, jurisdictions should maintain simple animal annexes and checklists tied to existing Emergency Operations Plans. Those plans should identify likely species, pre-designated holding and shelter sites, transport assets, veterinary partners, intake and tracking procedures, communications contingencies, and feasible sheltering models, including animal-only, co-located, cohabitated, and non-congregate options.

Animal EM Asset Directory

The interviews also point to a specific statewide weakness: New Mexico lacks a reliable, state-vetted

picture of what animal emergency resources actually exist. Multiple practitioners recommended a surveyed resource directory identifying trailers, portable kennels, corrals, fairgrounds, sheltering teams, veterinary partners, volunteers, and potential housing sites. Paired with FEMA resource typing and simple request pathways, such a directory would reduce the current dependence on personal knowledge of who has equipment, who can move it, and who can staff it. This is particularly important in northern New Mexico, with its recurring shortages in holding capacity, large-animal transport, species-appropriate equipment, and emergency veterinary support.

Integration into EM Operations

Effective practice also requires full integration into ICS and EOC operations. Animal issues should be represented early enough to shape evacuation, sheltering, public messaging, transport, and reunification decisions. Baseline NIMS and ICS training for animal-response partners is essential, as is inclusion of animal scenarios in tabletop and functional exercises.

Agreements and MOUs

Equally important are pre-established, formal agreements. Handshake arrangements, especially across tribal and non-tribal jurisdictions, are not sufficient when incidents expand, reimbursement becomes necessary, or liability questions arise. Pre-event MOUs, cost-tracking protocols, and deployment expectations should be established before a disaster, not negotiated during one.

Owner Preparedness

Finally, effective Whole Community response depends on public preparedness and owner responsibility. Interviewees emphasized that emergency management can assist, but cannot substitute for, owner planning. Households need realistic evacuation plans for pets and livestock, current identification and records, transport options, and supplies that support more than a short disruption. Public messaging should also reflect what is already working in New Mexico, including co-located sheltering models and reunification as a primary operational goal.

The State of Texas has built one of the nation's most comprehensive animal disaster preparedness and response systems. A cornerstone of that system is the Texas A&M Veterinary Emergency Team (VET), established in 2010 by the university's College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences.¹⁴⁶

As the only state-level veterinary medical care provider named in the Texas Emergency Response Plan, VET plays a critical role in disaster recovery. The team delivers triage and medical treatment to animals injured or made ill by disasters, coordinates with community animal shelters, and assists animal owners navigating chaotic post-disaster conditions. These efforts help communities transition more effectively from immediate response to recovery. VET also supports urban search and rescue operations, including specialized care for trained USAR dogs.

The team is led by Dr. Deb Zoran, one of only a few Incident Support Team veterinarians in the United States. Dr. Zoran met in May with legislators in Washington D.C. about expanding the VET model to a nationwide program that aims to strengthen disaster preparedness and response efforts on behalf of animals around the country.

VET supports Texas A&M Task Force 1 on all in-state deployments and can provide assistance nationally when needed. Past responses include the Camp Fire in California, Hurricane Ian in Florida, the 2020 southern Oregon wildfires, and the Smokehouse Creek Fire in 2024, the largest wildfire in Texas history.

A key part of VET's mission is to help prepare future veterinarians for disaster response, strengthening the pipeline of professionals ready to operate in high

Photo by TAMU VET



The Veterinary Emergency Team treats a search and rescue dog during the 2025 Kerr County, Texas flood disaster.

stress environments. Texas A&M and VET created the nation's only required veterinary emergency response rotation for fourth-year veterinary students, providing hands-on experience in disaster operations before graduation.

VET's holistic model integrates response, service, education, and research by bringing together students, faculty, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service agents, and emergency management professionals. This collaborative approach strengthens animal-focused preparedness and response while supporting broader public safety and community resilience goals.

The State of Texas emphasizes preparedness at the local level. The Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC), which oversees animal health regulations and disease control, encourages jurisdictions to establish standing Animal Issues Committees to plan for evacuation, sheltering, transportation, and veterinary care during disasters. TAHC provides a concise Animal Issues Committee Guidance Document to help communities get started.¹⁴⁷

The Veterinary Emergency Team seeks to strengthen animal disaster preparedness and response in Texas and across the United States.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to establish a coherent statewide framework that responds to stakeholder-identified needs previously described in this section. Collectively, these reforms aim to shift New Mexico toward a proactive and coordinated statewide emergency management system that effectively includes animals in its Whole Community approach, protecting both animals and public safety.

System Capacity and Operational Readiness

1. Develop a statewide animal emergency management resource directory.

- a. Compile a standardized directory of animal response assets (deployable sheltering supplies, transport resources, trained personnel, staging sites, large animal holding options, veterinary support).
- b. Pair the directory with a clear “how to request” process usable by local EOCs and animal services, including points of contact and expected documentation.
- c. Align the directory with FEMA Resource Typing concepts so jurisdictions can request the right capability quickly.

2. Establish regional caches of deployable sheltering and containment equipment.

- a. Pre-position portable kennel systems and deployable shelter kits at multiple locations statewide to reduce transport time and ensure redundancy.
- b. Pre-position large-animal containment supplies (panels, gating, water delivery options) where hazard risk and transport distance justify it.
- c. Include maintenance and rapid-deployment readiness requirements so equipment is operational when needed.

3. Build a scalable transport capability model that serves both daily transfers and disaster response.

- a. Formalize transport partner networks and establish an “everyday operations” transport function (inter-shelter transfers) that can pivot to evacuations.
- b. Include a logistics concept for staging, fueling, routing, and destination coordination.
- c. Incorporate safety and documentation standards suitable for multi-day incidents.

4. Strengthen veterinary surge planning and integrate veterinary support into incident operations.

- a. Create standing activation relationships with veterinary clinics, mobile veterinarians, and trained veterinary responders, including wildlife rehabilitators.
- b. Clarify how veterinary support is requested and integrated into incident operations, including access and credentialing considerations.
- c. Incorporate safety and documentation standards suitable for multi-day incidents.

Governance, Coordination, and Response Frameworks

5. Institutionalize animal services participation in EM planning structures.

- a. Create a state-funded position for a state animal EM coordinator.
- b. Ensure animal services/shelter leadership participates in local planning bodies where they exist.
- c. Clarify expected roles in EOC/ICS structures, including liaison functions and resource request pathways.
- d. Include animal operations in tabletop and functional exercises so coordination is practiced before incidents occur.

6. Adopt minimum preparedness standards for animal shelters and rescues (including facility evacuation and continuity planning).

- a. Require or strongly encourage an Emergency Operations Plan addressing community response and facility continuity (power shutoffs, water disruptions, smoke impacts, evacuation triggers, transport, temporary sites, staffing).
- b. Encourage scenario-based planning and mutual aid frameworks so shelters are not forced to improvise during incidents.

7. Modernize mutual aid and reimbursement frameworks for animal response.

- a. Develop pre-event MOU templates covering deployment triggers, roles, liability, documentation, demobilization, and reimbursement expectations.
- b. Establish cost-tracking practices and policy triggers in advance to reduce post-incident disputes and delays.

8. Strengthen tribal/non-tribal coordination through mutually developed written agreements where desired by tribal partners.

- a. Where tribal partners desire it, develop agreements clarifying access, points of contact, resource sharing expectations, and reimbursement/documentation practices.
- b. Include tribal partners in regional planning discussions and exercises to establish shared expectations and culturally appropriate operations.

9. Expand training pathways that connect animal response to EOC/ICS operations.

- a. Encourage baseline ICS training for animal welfare personnel and responders and provide specialized animal disaster training where needed (large animal rescue, sheltering operations, reunification workflows).
- b. Promote training that supports predictable deployable roles (sheltering team, transport team, intake/reunification support, veterinary support integration).

10. Standardize reunification documentation and tracking to function during degraded communications.

- a. Implement a consistent reunification workflow (intake documentation, photos, microchip scanning, owner contact, proof-of-ownership options, release documentation).
- b. Provide low-connectivity backup processes (paper forms, offline capture, later upload).
- c. Make reunification outcomes a core metric in after-action reviews and improvement planning.



A horse swims through rising waters during Ruidoso's devastating 2025 flash flooding.

Public Preparedness and Community Engagement

11. Implement a statewide owner-preparedness campaign aligned with emergency management messaging.

- a. Promote pet-inclusive evacuation planning and longer-duration self-sufficiency planning that includes animals.
- b. Encourage accessible storage of vaccination records, medications, and proof-of-ownership tools.
- c. Provide practical guidance through shelters, clinics, adoption programs, and community partners.

12. Strengthen co-located emergency sheltering readiness through defined roles and partner support.

- a. Clarify operating models for co-located sheltering, including owner responsibility for daily care and partner support for supplies and coordination.
- b. Develop safety, sanitation, and animal management protocols suitable for mass care environments.
- c. Build partner relationships so shelters/humane organizations can support mass care sites quickly with crates, food, and reunification support.

13. Create structured volunteer and donations management channels for animal response.

- a. Establish volunteer reception processes (credentialing, assignment, supervision, safety) to prevent self-deployment from disrupting operations.
- b. Pre-identify donation staging and sorting procedures and publish “what to donate” guidance early in incidents through coordinated public information.



A New Mexico family adopts Oyster the puppy from Española Humane.

Putting It All Together

Introduction

New Mexico's animal services needs are urgent, but they are also solvable. Local expertise, tested best practices, community engagement, and state investment demonstrate that together we can move our state toward better outcomes for animals, families, and communities alike.

"Sustaining progress means creating a culture that values both people and animals."

—Ed Jamison, CEO,
Operation Kindness

Photo by Steven McFadden



County officials, Congresswoman Melanie Stansbury (in the red coat), and a shelter dog participate in the groundbreaking for Sandoval County's new Animal Resource Center, slated to open in 2027.

Photo by Mattie Allen/Española Humane

Overall Best Practices in Animal Services

Animal services is a broad public function that touches animal welfare, public safety, public health, emergency management, housing stability, and community well-being. Although specialized fields such as animal sheltering, dog/cat rescue, equine rescue, field services, cruelty investigations, and animal emergency management each have their own standards and best practices, effective animal services systems share a common foundation. The following elements describe core practices that help agencies improve outcomes for animals, support people, and strengthen communities.

1. Animal Welfare Has a Seat at the Table

Animal welfare professionals should have a meaningful role in state and local policy, budgeting, emergency planning, housing discussions, public safety initiatives, and health-related decisions that affect animals and caregivers. Too often, animal services are consulted only after a crisis or after policies have been designed. Including shelter leaders, veterinarians, field officers, behavior specialists, rescue partners, and humane educators early leads to more realistic, humane solutions. Their expertise helps communities understand how ordinances, enforcement practices, housing policy, and disaster plans will affect animals and people in practice.

2. Systems Thinking

Best-practice animal services programs use systems thinking rather than isolated, reactive responses. A crowded shelter, for example, reflects more than high intake; it may also be connected to limited veterinary access, housing instability, weak return-to-owner processes, or inadequate community support. Systems thinking encourages agencies to look upstream, identify root causes, and understand how each part of the animal services network influences the others. This approach supports prevention, coordinated problem solving, and smarter use of limited resources.

3. Unified Human and Animal Services

Animals and people are deeply connected, so animal services should not operate as though

animals exist separately from human needs. Families may face surrender decisions because of eviction, medical costs, domestic violence, transportation barriers, or temporary financial hardship. Unified human and animal services link pet support with social services, public health, housing assistance, behavioral health resources, and emergency aid. When agencies collaborate across these systems, they can help families keep companion animals safely, reduce shelter intake, and protect the human-animal bond.

4. Community Engagement

Strong animal services agencies treat the community as a partner, not merely as a source of complaints, adopters, or ordinance violations. Engagement includes listening sessions, culturally appropriate outreach, accessible adoption events, volunteer opportunities, pet retention support, and education that meets people where they are. Effective engagement also means recognizing barriers such as language, transportation, cost, and distrust of government systems. When residents feel respected and included, they are more likely to seek help early, comply with humane laws, foster or adopt animals, and support public animal welfare goals.

5. Data Collection

Reliable data is essential for evaluating performance, identifying needs, and making informed decisions. Agencies should track intake, outcomes, length of stay, field service calls, return-to-owner rates, foster participation, euthanasia reasons, bite incidents, complaint types, service gaps, and demographic or geographic patterns where appropriate. Data should be accurate, consistently defined, and used to guide improvement rather than punish staff or communities. When agencies understand their numbers, they can set priorities, justify funding, measure progress, and identify which interventions are working.

6. Transparency

Transparency builds public trust and accountability. Agencies should communicate clearly about their capacity, limitations, policies, outcomes, funding needs, and difficult decisions. This includes publishing key statistics, explaining how priorities are set,

sharing progress and setbacks, and being honest about challenges such as overcrowding, disease outbreaks, staffing shortages, or resource constraints. Transparency does not require perfection; it asks for openness, accuracy, and accountability. Communities are more likely to help when they understand the realities facing local animal services.

7. Respectful Communication

Respectful communication within animal welfare is a core best practice. The principle of compassion on which the movement is based must extend to people as well as to animals. Within the animal services sector, the work often involves stressful, emotional, or high-conflict situations. Staff and volunteers may speak with residents who are grieving, frightened, angry, overwhelmed, or facing financial hardship. Humane communication avoids shame and blame, and focuses on problem solving. Respect and kindness should also be expected from animal advocates and owners interacting with animal services staff, elected officials, and other community members. To put it succinctly, “Don’t be judgy!” urges SPARC, a nonprofit devoted to positive, nonjudgmental narratives that inspire “our best work for animals and people.”¹⁴⁸

8. Collaboration

No single agency can meet every animal welfare need alone. Collaboration between rescue groups, veterinarians, social service providers, law enforcement, public health agencies, emergency managers, schools, housing organizations, faith groups, and neighborhood leaders expands capacity and expertise. Successful collaboration requires clear roles, shared expectations, regular communication, and mutual respect. Partnerships should be strategic rather than accidental, with agreements that protect animal welfare, support staff, and improve public services.

9. Public Investment

Animal services is an essential public service and should be funded accordingly. Adequate investment supports safe facilities, veterinary care, field response, technology, staffing, training, community programs, disaster readiness, and humane enforcement. Underfunded agencies are often forced into crisis management, which can increase costs and worsen

outcomes. Public investment should reflect the value communities place on safety, compassion, public health, and responsible stewardship of animals. Funding decisions should be informed by data, workload, community needs, and long-term planning.

10. Professional Workforce Development

Animal services work requires specialized knowledge, emotional resilience, technical skill, and sound judgment. Professional workforce development includes onboarding, continuing education, leadership development, safety training, trauma-informed supervision, career pathways, and fair compensation. Staff need training in animal handling, disease prevention, behavior, investigations, customer service, conflict de-escalation, equity, data systems, and emergency response. Supporting the workforce improves retention, reduces burnout, enhances public service, and strengthens outcomes for animals.

11. Animal Inclusion In Emergency Planning

Disaster planning must include animals because people often delay evacuation or refuse shelter if they cannot protect their household animals. Animal-inclusive planning should address evacuation, transportation, emergency sheltering, reunification, veterinary care, search and rescue coordination, volunteer management, and public messaging. Plans should be developed before disasters occur and tested with emergency management partners. Including animals in disaster response protects animal welfare, supports human safety, and helps communities recover more effectively.

12. Humane, Responsible Ownership

Best-practice animal services promote humane, responsible ownership and caretaking through education, access, and accountability. Responsible ownership includes appropriate food, water, shelter, veterinary care, identification, enrichment, training, containment, and humane treatment. However, agencies should recognize that many challenges arise from lack of access rather than lack of concern. Low-cost veterinary services, pet food support, behavior resources, licensing assistance, and clear guidance can help owners meet expectations. When enforcement is necessary, it should be fair, proportionate, and focused on improving welfare and safety.

Overall Recommendations for New Mexico

Although this report is a needs assessment, not a strategic plan, each of the four animal services pillars covered includes specific recommendations. Together, they point to actions applicable statewide that would strengthen animal services across New Mexico. The 12 recommendations below identify key attitudes, policies, practices, infrastructure, investments, and workforce development needed to make humane outcomes possible not only in the north central region but also statewide.

1. Establish a Voice for Animal Protection Within State Government

New Mexico lacks a centralized state authority with broad responsibility for animal welfare. Currently, animal issues are divided among agencies with limited, often siloed mandates; these include entities focused on commercially raised livestock, veterinary licensing, wildlife, agriculture, emergency response, and local enforcement. This fragmentation makes it difficult to set statewide priorities, collect consistent data, coordinate services, or identify gaps in funding and accountability.

New Mexico should establish a formal state-level voice for animal protection, beginning with companion animal and equine issues and expanding as appropriate. A dedicated office or department could coordinate policy, provide technical assistance, support shelter and rescue standards, strengthen disaster planning, administer grants, and serve as a central point of contact. Centralized leadership would support, not replace, local responsibility.

2. Include Animals

New Mexico policymakers should routinely ask whether proposed policies, projects, budgets, or emergency plans affect animals. If they do, those decisions should be designed to protect animal welfare, improve public safety, and support the people responsible for animal care.

This practice should extend beyond animal ordinances. Housing, transportation, disaster response, domestic violence services, behavioral health, land use, economic development, public health, and environmental policies can all affect animals and

the people responsible for them. Including animals early prevents costly after-the-fact fixes and helps communities anticipate real-world needs.

A simple animal-impact review would encourage agencies to identify risks, consult knowledgeable partners, and build humane, practical solutions into policy design.

3. Embrace Shared Responsibility

All New Mexicans share responsibility for animal welfare. Families with animals, local and state officials, tribal governments, nonprofits, veterinarians, animal control officers, law enforcement, educators, social services workers, businesses, and community members all have roles to play.

Humane communities are not created by shelters alone. They depend on prevention, education, accessible veterinary care, responsible ownership, enforcement, safe housing options, and public awareness. Education on humane care, coupled with safety net services, will help keep animals at home with their families, off the streets, and out of shelters.

Shared responsibility also means recognizing that many animal problems are connected to human hardship, including poverty, transportation barriers, housing instability, and limited veterinary access. Treating animal welfare as a shared public good helps prevent neglect, support families, reduce shelter intake, and improve outcomes for animals and people.

4. Increase State Investment

Public investment in animal services has lagged behind other essential services in New Mexico, contributing to persistent problems for animals, families, communities, and local governments. Too often, animal services are treated as optional or funded only during crises, even though inadequate services create costs for public health, safety, law enforcement, housing, and emergency management.

Improving animal services will require sustained state and local investment. Shelters, animal control programs, spay/neuter services, veterinary access initiatives, equine rescue capacity, humane education, enforcement training, and disaster response all depend on reliable funding.



Sydney Long, an Iowa State University vet school student, cares for a horse at a Taos Pueblo equine clinic in 2025.

Long is considering practicing in New Mexico after graduation, enticed by the state's natural beauty and by 2024 state legislation providing up to \$80,000 in tuition debt relief.

The average DVM debt for new grads is over \$210,000.¹⁴⁹

State funding can help equalize opportunity across urban, rural, and tribal communities, while local funding ensures services reflect community needs. Investments should support facility upgrades, equipment, staffing, training, mobile services, data systems, and prevention programs, with funding structured to reward collaboration, transparency, measurable outcomes, and humane practices.

5. Take a Regional Approach

Many animal issues cross jurisdictional boundaries. Free-roaming horses move across public, private, tribal, county, municipal, and federal lands. Dog and cat overpopulation can affect multiple communities when animals are transferred, displaced, abandoned, or running at large. Disaster response, disease control, cruelty investigations, and veterinary shortages often require resources no single locality can provide alone.

New Mexico should encourage regional planning that brings neighboring jurisdictions together to assess shared needs, coordinate services, and reduce duplication. Regional models could include shared sheltering capacity, mobile veterinary clinics, joint response protocols, cross-trained personnel, mutual aid agreements, coordinated adoption and transport networks, and regional spay/neuter strategies. This approach stretches limited resources while addressing problems at the scale at which they occur.

6. Develop Multijurisdictional Solutions

State-local, county-municipal, tribal-nontribal, and cross-agency partnerships are essential to improving animal services. Many communities face overlapping responsibilities but lack clear agreements about who responds, who pays, where animals are housed, and how cases are resolved. Multijurisdictional solutions can clarify roles and create more consistent services for residents and animals.

These solutions should include written agreements, shared protocols, sustainable funding, culturally respectful consultation, and mechanisms for resolving disputes. They should also recognize tribal sovereignty and the distinct needs of rural areas. Partnerships can strengthen animal cruelty response, emergency sheltering, veterinary outreach, free-roaming equine management, transport, and public education. When jurisdictions plan together before problems arise, they can respond more humanely and efficiently.

7. Establish Public-Private Partnerships

Government and the private sector must work together to improve animal services. Public agencies bring legal authority, accountability, and public funding. Nonprofits, foundations, veterinary practices, universities, businesses, and volunteers often bring expertise, community trust, flexibility, and additional resources. Strong partnerships can expand spay/neuter access, foster and adoption networks, equine

placement, emergency response, humane education, cruelty intervention, pet retention services, and workforce training. These partnerships should be formalized through clear agreements defining expectations, funding, reporting, liability, animal care standards, and communication protocols. They should also avoid shifting public responsibilities entirely onto nonprofits without support. Public-private collaboration can accelerate innovation, reduce duplication, and create more cost-effective systems.

8. Develop the Animal Services and Veterinary Workforces

New Mexico leaders have identified shortages in healthcare, education, and other workforces; animal services face similar challenges. The state should promote careers in animal sheltering, animal control, cruelty investigation, animal law, equine rescue and herd management, veterinary medicine, and animal-related disaster planning and response. Workforce development should include career pathways, certification support, continuing education, mentorship, competitive compensation, mental health support, and specialized training for rural, tribal, and bilingual service contexts.

Veterinary shortages are especially acute in shelter medicine, equine and large-animal practice, rural communities, and tribal areas. New Mexico should explore recruitment and retention incentives such as tuition assistance, rural practice stipends, internships, and partnerships with universities and professional associations.

9. Integrate Human and Animal Services

A One Health approach recognizes that human well-being, animal welfare, and community health are interconnected. Linking human services with animal services benefits both. People may delay seeking shelter, medical care, behavioral health support, disaster assistance, or protection from violence because to avoiding leave animals behind. Families may surrender animals because they lack temporary housing, pet food, veterinary care, transportation, or support during crisis. Integrating animal services into human service systems helps prevent these outcomes.

Domestic violence programs, homeless services, senior services, child welfare, behavioral health

providers, emergency managers, housing agencies, and public health departments should have pathways for animal-related needs. These may include pet-inclusive sheltering, temporary foster care, referral networks, pet food banks, veterinary assistance, service animal planning, and cross-training for staff.

10. Strengthen Data Collection

New Mexico needs stronger data collection in animal services. Reliable data can identify service gaps, measure progress, guide funding decisions, show communities what is working, and demonstrate the value of the animal services sector to the State.

Shelters, animal control agencies, rescues, veterinary access programs, equine services, responders, and grant recipients should collect consistent information while protecting privacy and safety concerns. Useful data may include intake and outcome numbers, calls for service, cruelty reports, response times, spay/neuter activity, vaccination and microchip services, staffing levels, facility capacity, field service coverage, transfer patterns, and emergency response needs.

Public reporting builds trust and allows residents, policymakers, funders, and partners to track improvements over time. Data systems should be practical, funded, and designed to support better decisions rather than burden strained staff.

11. Emphasize Emergency Preparedness

To strengthen resilience and safety, New Mexicans should include animals in disaster preparedness and response. Wildfires, floods, extreme heat, winter storms, evacuations, and public health emergencies can quickly become animal welfare crises when plans do not account for companion and service animals, equines, household livestock, and shelter animals.

Emergency plans should identify animal-friendly evacuation options, transportation resources, temporary sheltering sites, veterinary support, feed and supply chains, reunification systems, volunteer management, and communication strategies.

Planning should include local governments, tribal nations, emergency managers, animal control, shelters, rescues, veterinarians, law enforcement, and community organizations. Preparedness also requires public education so households know how



to evacuate with animals, assemble supplies, and maintain identification. Animal-inclusive planning protects lives, reduces chaos, and speeds recovery.

12. Prioritize Prevention

Populations of dogs, cats, and equines must be reduced until they align with the sheltering system's capacity for care and the number of New Mexico households able to adopt and care for the animals. Prevention will require steady, well-funded spay/neuter/gelding/fertility control services, targeting the most underserved communities and the breeds most represented in shelters and rescues. Combined with safety net services, lost pet reunification, and adoption promotion, prevention is the bedrock of sound, humane animal welfare policy.

Conclusion

The question now is whether New Mexico will respond to its animal welfare challenges as isolated crises or as an opportunity to lead. Communities across the state need practical tools: accessible spay/neuter services, safe sheltering options, humane enforcement, support for pet and equine owners in crisis, transportation and veterinary capacity, and stronger partnerships among governments, tribes, nonprofits, advocates, and residents. These investments are not only acts of compassion that reduce suffering for animals and people alike; they also improve community safety, help families remain intact, and strengthen local and state economies.

If New Mexico chooses sustained, evidence-informed action, it can move beyond being defined by today's gaps in services, laws, and funding. It can become a model for humane, community-centered animal services in the Southwest and beyond. The path forward is not to ask whether New Mexico can afford to build such a system, but whether it can afford not to. With the right vision, collaboration, and public commitment, the Land of Enchantment can become the leader of humane governance in the nation.

Left: At an adoption event, Los Alamos Shelter Manager Paul Sena is on the lookout for a new family for Clifford. Tomorrow, there will be other animals in Sena's care awaiting a loving home.

Resources

This section includes websites, organizations, guides, and other resources related to the animal services sector. Many offer practical strategies to support animal-inclusive services in your community.

All of the links were operational as of July 20, 2026.

NEW MEXICO RESOURCES

Animal Rescues

[A Barking Chance Animal Rescue](#)
[ABQ Chihuahua Rescue](#)
[Almost Home New Mexico](#)
[Animal Friends Alliance](#)
[Argos, A Shelter Dog Rescue](#)
[Birds of a Feather Parrot Rescue](#)
[Chama Valley Humane Society](#)
[Chesapeake Bay Retriever Relief and Rescue](#)
[Dixon Animal Protection Society \(DAPS\)](#)
[Doberman Rescue of New Mexico](#)
[East Mountain Companion Animal Project](#)
[Emi's Heart Rescue](#)
[F.A.T. Katz](#)
[Felines & Friends New Mexico](#)
[Fur-get Me Not Canine Rescue](#)
[German Shepherd Dog Rescue of Central New Mexico](#)
[Haven for Hamsters](#)
[Heart and Soul Animal Sanctuary](#)
[High Desert Cat Rescue](#)
[High Desert Doberman Rescue](#)
[June's Senior Cat Rescue](#)
[Kindred Spirit Animal Sanctuary](#)
[Lap Dog Rescue](#)
[Me and My Shadow Dog Rescue](#)
[Milagro Boston Terrier Rescue](#)
[Mountain Mamas Pyrs and Pups](#)
[New Mexico Animal Friends](#)
[New Mexico Dachshund Rescue](#)
[Nine Lives Rescue](#)
[On a Wing and a Prayer](#)
[Pei People Shar Pei Rescue](#)
[People's Anti-Cruelty Association \(PACA\)](#)
[Pet-A-Bulls](#)
[Pitties and Kitties Rescue](#)
[Regal Dane Rescue](#)
[Rescue Rovers](#)
[Rocky Mountain Cocker Rescue](#)
[Rocky Mountain Puppy Rescue](#)
[Roots Animal Sanctuary](#)
[Siberian Husky Rescue](#)

[Southwest Collie and Sheltie Rescue](#)
[Southwest English Setter Rescue](#)
[Street Cat Hub](#)
[Wildflower Ranch and Rescue](#)

Animal Shelters in North Central NM

[City of Las Vegas Animal Care Center](#), San Miguel County
[Edgewood Animal Shelter](#), Santa Fe County
[Española Humane](#), Rio Arriba County
[Los Alamos County Animal Shelter](#), Los Alamos
[Raton Humane Society](#), Colfax County
[Rio Rancho Animal Resource Center](#), Sandoval County
[Sandoval County Animal Resource Center](#), Bernalillo
[Santa Fe Animal Shelter and Humane Society](#), Santa Fe County
[Stray Hearts Animal Shelter](#), Taos, Taos County
[Watermelon Mountain Ranch](#), Rio Rancho, Sandoval County

Animal Welfare Orgs/Shelters

For an extensive list, see [APNM's New Mexico Animal Resources Guide](#)
[ACTion Programs for Animals \(APA\)](#), Las Cruces
[Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department](#)
[Animal Humane New Mexico](#), Albuquerque
[Bernalillo County Animal Care Services](#), Albuquerque
NMCAN (New Mexico Companion Animal Network)
[NMDOG](#), Albuquerque

Conferences

[New Mexico Conference on The Link](#)
[New Mexico Emergency Management Conference](#)
[New Mexico Humane Conference](#)

Equine Rescues/Sanctuaries in North Central NM

[Equine Spirit Sanctuary](#), Ranchos de Taos, Taos County
[The Horse Shelter](#), Cerrillos, Santa Fe County
[Horseshoe Canyon Rescue Ranch](#), Youngsville, Rio Arriba County
[New Mexico Horse Rescue at Walkin N Circles Ranch](#), Edgewood, Santa Fe County
[Sky Mountain Wild Horse Sanctuary](#), San Miguel County
[Tamaya Horse Rescue](#), San Ysidro, Sandoval County

Equine Rescues/Sanctuaries in Other NM Locales

[Dharmahorse Equine Sanctuary](#), Las Cruces, Doña Ana County

[End of the Road Ranch](#), Silver City, Grant County

[Four Corners Equine Rescue](#), Aztec, San Juan County

Lotta Love Farm and Rescue, Lincoln County

[Masleña Rescue Foundation](#), Tijeras, Bernalillo County

[Mustang Camp](#), Blanco, San Juan County

[Perfect Harmony Animal Rescue and Sanctuary](#),

Chaparral, Doña Ana County

[Wilderwood Equine Therapy and Rescue](#), Peralta,

Valencia County

Equine Resources

Animal Protection New Mexico, [Equine Protection Fund](#)

New Mexico Equine Rescue Alliance

New Mexico Livestock Board, [Licensed Equine Rescues](#)

Humane Education

Animal Humane New Mexico, [Education](#), Albuquerque

Animal Protection New Mexico, [The Animal Connection](#)

New Mexico Wildlife Center, [Education Programs](#)

[Pajarito Environmental Education Center](#), Los Alamos

Veterinary and Animal Science Education Programs

Central New Mexico Community College (CNM),

[Veterinary Technician Program](#)

Eastern New Mexico University, [Animal and Dairy](#)

[Science/Pre-Veterinary B.S. Program](#)

Navajo Technical University, [Veterinary Technology Program](#)

New Mexico State University, [Animal and Range Sciences](#), [Pre-Veterinary Medicine](#), and [Human-Animal Interaction Undergraduate Minor](#)

Pima Medical Institute (Albuquerque campus), [Veterinary Technician Program](#)

San Juan College, [Online Veterinary Technology Degree and Certificate Programs](#)

University of New Mexico Continuing Education, Online [Horse Care Management](#) and [Veterinary Assistant, Veterinary Assistant Horse Care Management, and Veterinary Office Manager Programs](#)

Wildlife Advocacy

[Advocates for Snake Preservation](#), Silver City

[Conservation Voters New Mexico](#), Santa Fe

[Gila Conservation Coalition](#), Silver City

[New Mexico Wild](#), Albuquerque

[New Mexico Wildlife Federation](#), Albuquerque

Prairie Dog Pals, Albuquerque

[WildEarth Guardians](#), Santa Fe

Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation

[Cottonwood Rehabilitation](#), Rio Arriba County

[Desert Willow Wildlife Rehabilitation Center](#), Carlsbad

[Gila Wildlife Rescue](#), Silver City

[Hawks Aloft](#), Albuquerque

[Land of Enchantment Wildlife Foundation](#), Rio Arriba County

[New Mexico Wildlife Center](#), Española

[Santa Fe Raptor Center](#), Santa Fe County

[Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary](#), Ramah

[Wildlife Rescue Inc. of New Mexico](#), Albuquerque

NATIONAL RESOURCES

Animal Welfare Organizations

[American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals \(ASPCA\)](#)

[Animal Welfare Institute \(AWI\)](#)

[Animal Legal Defense Fund \(ALDF\)](#)

[Best Friends Animal Society \(BFAS\)](#)

[Companions and Animals for Reform and Equity \(CARE\)](#)

[Human Animal Support Services \(HASS\)](#)

[Humane World for Animals \(HWA\)](#), formerly Humane Society of the United States (HSUS)

[National Link Coalition](#)

[People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals \(PETA\)](#)

[Rural Humane](#)

Conferences

[Animal Care Expo](#), Humane World for Animals

[Association for Animal Welfare Advancement Annual Conference](#)

[Best Friends National Conference](#)

Humane Education

Animal Welfare Institute, [Education Resources](#)

[Animalearn and The Science Bank](#)

[Association of Professional Humane Educators](#)

Media and Podcasts

[Hearts Speak](#), Stock Photography

[Supporting People & Animal Relationships for Change \(SPARC\)](#)

[We Animals](#), Animal Photojournalism

[Animal Welfare Podcasts Curated List](#)

["The Best Friends Podcast"](#), Best Friends Animal Society

["The Community Cats Podcast with Staci LeBaron,"](#)

Community Cats Central

["The Intake"](#) podcast, AAWA

["My Veterinary Life"](#) podcast, AVMA

["PetChat with Murad & Bobbi,"](#) NM weekly radio program and podcast

Mental Health and Compassion Fatigue

American Veterinary Medical Association, [Wellbeing Resources for Veterinary Professionals](#)
ASPCA Pro, [Compassion Fatigue & Resilience Resources for Animal Shelter Staff & Volunteer Wellness](#)
[Compassion Consortium](#)
HumanePro, [Compassion Fatigue](#)
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), [Frontline and Public Safety Professionals Resources](#)
Not One More Vet (NOMV), [Advocate of Veterinary Mental Health](#)
[Practice Compassionate Badassery](#), Jessica Dolce

Tribal

[Animal Rez-Q Inc.](#)
[NAGI Foundation](#)
[Native American Humane Society](#)
[Natives in VetMed](#)
[RezDawg Rescue](#)
[Soul Dog Rescue](#)

ANIMAL SHELTERING RESOURCES

Adoption/Rehoming

[Dogs on Deployment](#)
[Home to Home](#), Rehoming Support
HumanePro, [Adopters Welcome](#)
[Rehome by Adopt a Pet](#)

Care Standards

[Association of Shelter Veterinarians' Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters](#)
New Mexico Board of Veterinary Medicine, [Animal Sheltering Minimum Standards](#)

Contracts

Best Friends Network Partners, [Lifesaving Animal Service Contracts](#)
HASS, [Budget Calculator](#)

Data

Best Friends Network Partners, [Pet Lifesaving Dashboard](#), [Shelter Data](#), and [Shelter Pet Data Alliance](#)
Shelter Animals Count, [Data Dashboards](#)

Grants

Association for Animal Welfare Advancement, [Grants](#)
ASPCA Pro [Grant Opportunities](#)
ASPCA Pro, [Other Animal Welfare Funders](#)
Carroll Petrie Foundation, [Animals Program](#)
[Greater Good Charities Rescue Rebuild Grants](#)
Grey Muzzle Organization, [Grants for Senior Dog Programs](#)

Maddie's Fund, [Grant Opportunities](#)
National Animal Care & Control Association, [Grant Opportunities](#)
New Mexico GrantWatch, [Grants for Animal Welfare, Pets, and Wildlife](#)
Red Rover, [Domestic Violence Assistance Grants](#)

Services for People with Companion Animals

Animal Humane New Mexico, [Pet-Friendly Apartments in Albuquerque](#)
HumanePro, [Pets For Life Program](#)
Paws and Stripes, [Veterans Programs](#)
Santa Fe Animal Shelter, [End-of-Life Services](#)
[Street Homeless Animals Project](#), Santa Fe

Domestic Violence Resources

Animal Protection New Mexico, [CARE Program](#)
Animal Welfare Institute, [Safe Havens for Pets Searchable Directory](#)
[Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women](#)
[Don't Forget the Pets](#), Coaching Programs for Crisis Shelters and Video Library
[New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#)
[Red Rover](#)

Pet Food Support

[Animal Welfare Coalition of Northeastern New Mexico](#)
[CARMA 4 Paws Pet Food Bank](#)
Felines & Friends New Mexico, [Operation Meow](#)
Food Depot, [Food 4 Pets](#)
Santa Fe Animal Shelter, [CASA Program](#)
Stray Hearts Animal Shelter, [Community Pet Food Bank](#)

Pet Loss and Grief

Animal Humane New Mexico, [Peaceful Paws End-of-Life Support](#)
Best Friends Animal Society, [Pet Loss](#)

Veterinary Financial Assistance

Humane World for Animals, [Pet Care Resources](#)
[The Pet Fund](#)
[Red Rover Relief Urgent Care Grants](#)
Santa Fe Animal Shelter, [Medical Resources Guide](#)

Shelter Design and Construction

HumanePro, [Shelter Design Resources](#)
Humane World for Animals, Animal Care Expo, [Barkitecture Learning Lab](#)
[Shelter Planners of America](#)

Shelter Operations

ASPCA, [Standard Operating Procedure \(SOP\) Template](#)
Best Friends Network Partners, [Resource Library](#)
University of California, Davis, Koret Shelter Medicine Program, [Resource Library](#)

Spay/Neuter

[Animal Balance](#)
Animal Protection New Mexico, [Spay/Neuter Resources by County](#)
[Animal Welfare Coalition of Northeastern New Mexico](#)
BISSELL Pet Foundation, [Fix the Future Program](#)
[Española Humane Animal Clinic](#)
Fido Fixers, [Mobile Spay/Neuter](#)
[Helping Paws Across Borders](#)
HumanePro, [Spay/Neuter](#)
Santa Fe Animal Shelter, [Spay/Neuter & Wellness Clinic](#)
[Spay Taos](#)
United Spay Alliance, [Spay/Neuter Training Resources](#)

Staff/Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

(Clinic) American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), [Factors that Support Retention and Drive Attrition in the Veterinary Profession](#)
(Clinic) Humane World for Animals, [Rural Area Veterinary Services](#)
(Clinic) [Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing](#)
(Clinic) United Spay Alliance, [Vet Shortage Task Force](#)
(Staff/Volunteers) HASS, [Volunteer Recruitment](#)
(Staff/Volunteers) HumanePro, [Staff/Volunteer Management Discussion Group](#)
(Staff/Volunteers) [Maddie's Pet Forum](#)

Staff/Volunteer Training

ASPCA Pro, [Training](#)
Association for Animal Welfare Advancement (AAWA), [Certified Animal Welfare Administrator \(CAWA\) Credential Program and The Learning Center](#)
Best Friends Animal Society, [Best Friends Learn](#)
[Best Friends Animal Services Executive Leadership](#)
CARE, [Human and Animal Well-being Academy \(HAW\)](#)
Human Animal Support Services (HASS), [Playbook](#) and [Webinars](#)
Humane Network, [Alive & Thriving](#)
Humane Network, University of the Pacific, [Animal Shelter Behavioral Management Certificate Course](#)
Humane Network, University of the Pacific and PetCo Love, [Animal Shelter Management Certificate Course](#)
[Maddie's University](#)
National Animal Care & Control Association (NACA), [Shelter Safe Foundations in Animal Care](#)

Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate-Return (TNR/TNVR)

[Alley Cat Allies](#)
Best Friends Animal Society, [TNR FAQs](#)
[Community Cats Central](#)
[Felines & Friends New Mexico](#)
[Street Cat Hub](#)

ANIMAL CONTROL RESOURCES

Policy

HumanePro, [Humane Policy Toolkit](#)

Training

ASPCA Pro, [Cruelty Investigation Resources and Training](#)
Best Friends Network Partners, [Field Services & Officers](#)
HumanePro, [Animal Control/Field Services](#)
Justice Clearinghouse, [Webinars for Justice Professionals](#)
National Animal Care & Control Association (NACA), [Training Institute](#) (ACO I & II, ACO III, Mental Health First Aid, Certified Dispatch, Animal Control for LEOs) and [Leading Conversations Series](#)

EQUINE RESCUE RESOURCES

Equine Advocacy Organizations

Animal Welfare Institute, [Equines](#)
ASPCA Pro, [Equine Welfare](#)
[Homes for Horses Coalition](#)
[Horses and Humans Research Foundation](#)
[Horse Plus Humane Society](#)
HumanePro, [Equines](#)
[Mustang Heritage Foundation](#)
[New Mexico Horse Council](#)
[Return to Freedom Wild Horse Conservation](#)
Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance
United Horse Coalition, [Equine Resource Database](#)

Equine Care

[American Association of Equine Practitioners \(AAEP\)](#),
Care Guidelines for Equine Rescue and Retirement Facilities 2019 Edition
[Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries](#)
University of California, Davis, [Weill School of Veterinary Medicine Center for Equine Health](#)

Equine Facilitated Therapy and Learning

[PATH International](#) (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship)

Equine Immunocontraception

[The Science & Conservation Center](#)

ANIMAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT RESOURCES

Animal Advocates/Volunteers

New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (NMDHSEM), [Community Emergency Response Teams \(CERT\)](#)
[National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster](#)
[New Mexico Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster \(NMVOAD\)](#)

Animal Owners

American Humane Society, [Pet Disaster Preparedness](#)
Animal Protection New Mexico, [Disaster Preparedness](#)
ASPCA, [Disaster Preparedness](#)
NMDHSEM, [Preparedness for Residents](#)

Animal Shelters and Clinics

American Humane Society, [Disaster Preparedness for Shelters](#)
American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), [Emergency Planning for Veterinary Practices](#)
ASPCA Pro, [Customizable Emergency Response Plan for Animal Shelters](#)
ASPCA Pro, [Sample Plans for Evacuation and Sheltering](#)
Best Friends Animal Society, [Emergency Preparedness Toolkit & Resources](#)
FEMA, [Continuity Plan Template and Instructions for Non-Federal Entities and Community-Based Organizations](#)
HumanePro, [Disaster Prep & Response](#)
National Alliance of State Animal and Agricultural Emergency Programs (NASAAEP), [2023 Current Best Practices in Animal Emergency Management](#)

Disaster Grants

Banfield Foundation, [Disaster Relief Grant](#)
FEMA, [Grants](#)
Not One More Vet (NOMV), [Emergency Grants for Veterinary Practices](#)
Petco Love, [Disaster Relief Grants](#)
PetSmart Charities, [Disaster Response Grants](#)

Emergency Managers and Responders

Animal Search and Rescue, [Technical Animal Rescue Training](#)
Animal Services Incident Support Team (A.S.I.S.T.), [Animal Rescue in Disasters](#)
ASPCA Pro, [Disaster Preparedness & Response](#)
BISSELL Pet Foundation, [Animal Incident Management \(AIM\) Team](#)
Code3 Associates, [Building Disaster Capable Communities](#)
FEMA, [Emergency Management Institute Trainings](#)
National Alliance of State Animal and Agricultural Emergency Programs (NASAAEP), [2023 Current Best Practices in Animal Emergency Management](#)
National Animal Care & Control Association (NACA), [Disaster Portal](#)
[National Animal Rescue and Sheltering Coalition \(NARSC\)](#)
New Mexico Veterinary Medical Association (NMVMA), [Disaster Preparedness Resources](#)
Red Rover, [Community Animal Emergency Planning Resources](#)
Rural Domestic Preparedness Consortium, [Responder Trainings](#)
[Southwest Border Food Protection and Emergency Preparedness Center](#), New Mexico State University
[Texas A&M University Veterinary Emergency Team](#)
USDA Rural Development, [Disaster Resiliency and Recovery Guide](#)

Equine

ASPCA Pro, [Equine Cruelty and Disasters](#)
Humane World for Animals, [Equine Disaster Preparedness](#)

Legislators and Government Officials

Colorado State University, [Creating a Community Animal Disaster Plan](#)
International City/County Management Association (ICMA), [Emergencies & Disasters](#)
[Texas Animal Health Commission](#)
[U.S. Congress H.R.3858 \(PETS Act\) - Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act of 2006](#)

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Notes

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. In addition to interviews with 100+ north central New Mexico stakeholders, correspondence and interviews with state, national, and tribal experts included: **Albuquerque Animal Welfare Dept.** (Julie Buckland, Valerie Greif, Carolyn Ortega, Capt. David Rose, Carolyn Thompson); **American Red Cross** (Mark Gordon); **Animal Politics** (Ed Boks); **ASPCA** (Brittany Benesi, Sabrina Pacha, Kevin Pigg); **Bernalillo County Animal Care Services** (Ryan Armendariz, Misha Goodman, Benjamin Silva); **Best Friends Animal Society** (Judah Battista, Scott Giacoppo, Sharon Hawa, Audrey Lodato, Ledy VanKavage, Stacie Voss); **CalAnimals** (Jill Tucker); **Carroll Petrie Foundation** (Jackie Hall); **Humane Network** (Bonney Brown); **Humane Society of Lincoln County** (Abel Guzman, Chris Shows); **National Animal Care & Control Association** (Spencer Conover, Jerrica Owen, Mike Wheeler); **NAGI Foundation** (Laila Coniglio, Sheila Iyengar); **Natives in VetMed** (Jerilene Salabiye); **New Mexico Association of Emergency Management Professionals** (R.J. Chitwood); **New Mexico Board of Veterinary Medicine** (Dr. Amanda Favis, Jennifer Rabinowitz, Deborah Schenk, Dr. Ralph Zimmerman); **New Mexico Dept. of Agriculture** (Marshal Wilson); **New Mexico Livestock Board** (Dr. Alexandra Eckhoff, Dr. Samantha Holeck); **Rural Humane** (Cole Wakefield).
2. Events attended in person for research included the 2024 New Mexico Association of Emergency Management Professionals Conference, the 2024 and 2025 New Mexico Humane Conference, the 2025 Positive Links Conference, the 2025 Woofstock adoption event in Edgewood, the 2025 Day at the Ranch at NMHorse Rescue at Walkin N Circles Ranch, and a Taos Pueblo equine clinic.

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The Last Woof



Photos by Rueben Vigil

"I've been through an ordeal and so has he," says Rueben Vigil of his adopted dog, Silas, a stray formerly sheltered at Raton Humane Society (left). "Now, we're enjoying every moment of life together," says the Colfax County native.

Currently in service dog training, Silas helps Vigil with disabilities resulting from Parkinson's disease and multiple spinal surgeries. "He never leaves my side," the retiree says.

Out in public, people marvel at how responsive Silas is to his guardian. With care, patience, and rehabilitation, many animals rescued from hardship backgrounds—dogs, cats, horses, donkeys, and others—can become loyal companions and helpers.

"I would do anything for this dog," says Vigil. "And I know he would do anything for me."