

## Daily News

Housing market crash takes toll on family pets

By Dana Bartholomew, Staff Writer

It's sad enough when a family must lose its home during a soaring number of national bank foreclosures.

But when a growing number of homeowners must also give up their beloved dogs or cats, it can be devastating.

"It's heartbreak- ing," said Sheryl Perez, animal-care supervisor for the East Valley Animal Shelter in Van Nuys. "To see a grown man stand before you with his pet, crying his eyes out, it's sad.

"People are always relinquishing their animals, but I've never seen it as much as nowadays, when the economy has affected pet owners and pets."

As foreclosure signs spring up across Los Angeles, so has the number of unwanted pets. In the first four months of 2008, city animal shelters reported a 16 percent increase in pet drop-offs and abandoned animals over the same period last year.

While exact numbers of pets being given up because of foreclosures are not available, city shelters say the number of residents who report giving up their animals because of "moving" or "landlord" has increased 21percent.

The spike is mirrored at shelters across the nation, where pet "surrenders" largely due to the crisis in home foreclosures are soaring, according to the Humane Society of the United States.

Some families forced to move can't find apartment landlords or their own relatives willing to take pets. Others simply leave their pets behind.

In addition, some families that manage to keep their pets cannot afford veterinary care.

"It's a heartbreaking situation," said society spokeswoman Stephanie Shaincq. "We hear from shelters and rescue groups that not only are intakes up, but that more families are coming to them saying, 'We don't have the money to feed our pets.'"

To assist shelters, animal-control agencies and rescue agencies help

foreclosed families care for their pets; the Humane Society has established a special fund that offers grants from \$500 to \$2,000.

As a result of the housing crisis, the number of shelter euthanasias in the United States has likely increased, according to the Humane Society. And that includes Los Angeles.

At city shelters, the number of cats dropped off from January through April rose from 1,132 to 1,378, a 22 percent increase. Pet-dog surrenders increased from 2,633 to 2,977, a 13 percent jump.

But while the number of dogs and cats at L.A.'s six animal shelters rose 16 percent overall, the number of animals killed there shot up 31 percent - the first euthanasia increase in six years, according to Ed Boks, general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Animal Services.

Boks blamed housing foreclosures, which rose 314 percent across Los Angeles County during the first quarter of this year compared with the first quarter last year. Many more homeowners were in default.

"Pets are among the voiceless victims of the current economic downturn," Boks said. "I encourage families to prepare for their pets in the event of financial difficulties.

"An animal shelter should only be a last resort."

To aid residents forced to move into smaller digs, city shelters and some rescue groups are furnishing lists of pet-friendly apartment complexes.

In addition, Boks said the city might encourage more apartments to accept pets by creating a special bond fund to compensate landlords for damage caused by dogs and cats.

"This could open up a huge market for adoptable animals in Los Angeles," he said.

The pet housing crisis has also been felt by L.A.'s numerous animal rescue groups, now flooded by an influx of foreclosure-related pets.

"It's a horrible tragedy," said Melya Kaplan, founder of Voice for the Animals, an animal-rescue group that has a hotline for foreclosed pet owners. "In all my years of rescuing, I have never seen anything like this.

"We just got a call from a man whose home was foreclosed. He has to move in July. He was crying. He was telling us what a wonderful dog he has. He didn't know what to do. We're working to find him an apartment."

In the past four days alone, the East Valley shelter accepted 42 dogs from residents forced to move, Perez said. Many came from foreclosed homes.

Last month, the shelter took in Benji and Scrappy, two Labrador retriever siblings, from a foreclosed homeowner.

But when such owners come in, Perez said, they're usually too humiliated to admit they lost their job and were forced out of their foreclosed home. They just simply report that they must move.

"Hi guys, hi," said Perez, walking through a gauntlet of barking dogs up to Benji's kennel, where the 3-year-old black lab looked up with I-want-to-go-home eyes.

"Hi Ben. C'mon, good boy. Are you scared?"

Animal-control officers say they are finding more and more pets abandoned in vacated homes and backyards.

"I've never seen so many animals abandoned on properties and left behind at foreclosed homes," said Officer Raquel Sheldon, who has worked for the department eight years.

"It's not only that: It's also people who can't afford animals who are dropping them off at vacant properties.

"It's heart-wrenching, it really is. We never get used to it."