

## Homes for Horses Coalition Forum Summary

On September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the Homes for Horses Coalition brought together 28 individuals from 22 organizations --- 11 equine rescues, 7 national organizations, 2 advocacy/safety net providers and 2 from the law enforcement/prosecutorial arena for a forum facilitated by the ASPCA's Karen Medicus and Jennifer Dragotta. Participants were polled to determine innovative programs being utilized, where they felt at-risk horses were coming from, what were the barriers to saving those horses and how could they best be overcome. The group then looked at what programs were making a difference, what tools and resources were already in existence, the best way to disseminate that list and what was still needed. The following is a summary of the day's work:

The question "Where are at-risk horses coming from?" was posed and a list of 38 sources was collected. The group was asked to vote on the top 5 they felt they could impact and those were: 1) financially distressed owners, 2) well-intentioned but incapable rescues/rescuers, 3) uneducated or first-time owners who got more horse than they could handle, 4) lameness/injury /illness/blindness and 5) cruelty cases. The group then broke into small groups to consider what could be done.

- 1) Safety net programs are needed to help keep horses in their homes when otherwise good owners are facing short-term financial or health crises. Groups need to get past their fear of being taken advantage of or being inundated and openly promote their safety net efforts to provide hay/feed, vet/farrier/dental vouchers, gelding and wellness clinics and euthanasia support for horses at end of life.
- 2) When rescues collapse in an irresponsible manner, they taint the entire field. There continues to be a need for professional development not only on horse care, but on nonprofit management such as fundraising, Board development and planning. More peer-to-peer support through mentoring by accredited rescues, networking and collaboration from within the field is necessary as well. Accreditation and licensing are important to keep standards high.
- 3) To stave off the naïve owner who gets in over their head, pro-active efforts include offering new owner classes before a horse is obtained to introduce first-timers to the community's horse care professionals (farriers, vets, dentists, trainers) who can help before they find themselves in the need of it. Groups should be training the horses in their care prior to adoption and can introduce the new owners to trainers for additional lessons. Counter "free to good home" ads where little history or few proclivities are shared by marketing of "Adopt, Don't Shop" and "we'll help you get the horse that's right for your family and skills level." Match newbies up with experienced volunteers who can check in post-adoption and help resolve things before they become major issues – in a positive, non-judgmental manner. Promote programs that allow those interested in horses to get involved without purchasing, such as, volunteering, fostering and leasing of adoptable horses.
- 4) For equine that became at-risk due to illness and injury, access to low-cost care options and reasonably priced health insurance would be very helpful. More research is needed on equine health issues and what types of lameness can be resolved with appropriate therapies and corrective shoeing. Some felt it was important to stress that the "Horse is a lifetime commitment" while others felt that expectation may be hampering adoptions for horses in

rescues. Some also felt that it was part of a rescue's job to counsel callers looking to place senior equine on weighing euthanasia versus re-homing.

- 5) In many jurisdictions there is a need for stronger enforcement of the law. Action is often delayed until horses are critical because ACOs and law enforcement don't necessarily know what they are looking at. Rescues that have reached out and offered training sessions for local law enforcement and prosecutors have found success in the courtroom. Groups that have safety net programs should make these services known to those that investigate cruelty and neglect so help can be offered when appropriate. Building positive relationships with local law enforcement and offering assistance when needed will help establish rescues as resources.

Next the group was asked to identify the barriers to saving at-risk horses. From a list of 32 barriers, the group voted on the top five they felt the field could impact and broke into small groups again to consider what could be done.

1. Cost of care and rehabilitation – Form community partnerships, increase equine population turn-over through training and improved marketing, tap more corporate sponsors, work with vet and farrier schools, determine tax-deductible services under the IRS code, and increase collaboration with other equine rescues through bulk ordering, sharing donated tack/supplies, and working together on events and cruelty cases.
2. Reputation of horse rescues – Help other rescues and the public understand the importance/value of certification. Be transparent. Post credentials and memberships. Keep your Guidestar profile updated. Post and promote success stories to balance out the bad press the field receives. Be proactive in assisting and mentoring struggling groups before they receive negative press.
3. Collaboration between rescues – Identify common goals. Take part in regional coalitions/collaborations. Share knowledge and resources. Join your state horse council if there is one to represent equine welfare from the rescue perspective.
4. Reputation of rescue horses – What are your posts and photos saying about rescue horses? Don't perpetuate the message that horses from rescues are damaged goods by posting only "Before" photos. Make sure you include the "After" photo or the rehabilitation-in-progress photos too. Focus on what the horse can do. Image is improved when the public can see what rescue horses are capable of at trainer challenges, horse shows (especially if they come away with some ribbons), promotion of the purebreds that can be found at rescues and the circulation of success stories after adoption. Consider marketing directly to first-time owners and older women – especially those bomb-proof mature/senior horses. If your group doesn't have the right horse, work with other rescues to help adopters find the best match.
5. Lack of trust between rescues, advocates and the industry – Avoid fanatic stance and find common ground and issues you can work on together. Host meetings with neutral leadership. Understand and embrace the unique niche of each organization.

The group identified programs they felt were working to make a difference for the field:

- Safety net programs to keep horses in their homes and out of rescues by providing short-term support via hay/feed, vet/farrier/dental vouchers, holding gelding and wellness clinics and euthanasia support, whether stand-alone programs or part of the work of rescues and sanctuaries.
- Programs that helped finance the rehabilitation and re-purposing of ex-racers such as Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance (TAA), Retired Racehorse Project, CANTER and the Rescuing Racers Initiative
- Rescues training horses for speedier turn-around utilizing such tools as the Forever Foundation – HSUS’s training program for rescues and trainer challenges
- Professional development support for the field provided by the Homes for Horses Coalition, ASPCA Equine Fund, and university extension programs amongst others
- Credentialing through the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, TAA and the state licensing of equine rescues and sanctuaries
- Advocating for the SAFE Act by making contact with legislators in your district, writing Letters to the Editor and attending Town Hall meetings as well as supporting the federal advocacy work being done by ASPCA, AWI and HSUS in Washington, DC
- Tapping local universities for student interns, volunteers and business guidance
- Firming up collaborations with those responsible for cruelty and neglect investigations to ensure the necessary parties are on-site for investigations and they understand their roles

The group finished the day by compiling a list of available tools and resources and deciding how best to promote the list within the field. (Plans are being made to post it on the Homes for Horses Coalition website and ASPCA Pro’s equine pages.)

The last piece of business was asking participants to list what resources are still needed. While five items were named, three of them already exist in some format:

1. Low-cost, equine organization-specific database for managing populations, work and records
2. Resource-sharing info network (something akin to a version of Aid Matrix)
3. Facebook group (HHC already has a FB group for members)
4. Template library (many templates can already be found on [www.aspcapro.org](http://www.aspcapro.org) and [www.homesforhorses.org](http://www.homesforhorses.org))
5. Central adoption site (several exist such as petfinder.com and equine.com)