

“My kidneys don't work quite right, and I am also blind.” That's the description on an adoption page for a homeless cat named “Squeaks”. I am writing this during the coronavirus shut-down. All other animals in her shelter were adopted, but she still has nowhere to live, because no one has been willing to take on her problems. She's just one example of many pets who find themselves without homes, and often without basic necessities. I'm trying to change that with a new phone app I've created.

Approximately 6.5 million companion animals enter U.S. shelters every year according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Whether it's a stray dog someone picked up, a cat taken from inhumane living conditions, or a puppy moved from a shelter where animals are euthanized, these pets are lucky if they get rescued. An animal enthusiast website called The Dodo says there are about 13,600 community animal shelters across the U.S. managing an intake of about 7.6 million pets ever year. Fewer than half of those animals make it out of the system in that span. Due to overpopulation, so-called kill shelters put down many newborns to avoid shortages of food and space. Some unwanted pets were born with mental disabilities, others were saved from abusive situations and have lingering problems. These are the animals that have the hardest time getting adopted.

To help with solutions, I designed a free app called Rescue Me Massachusetts. It lists adoptable animals in local shelters, helping our community's homeless pets find homes. It's for people either interested in adopting, or who just love looking at animals. The app is usually full of pictures and descriptions of dogs, cats, and even rescued bunnies. It also offers tips and information for new owners, and there's a map with local shelters and veterinary hospitals. I came up with the idea, and started designing it last summer, but quickly learned, creating an app is not an easy process. I faced challenges working around potential copyright and trademark

infringements, getting permission from shelters to work in partnership, making sure users can't post offensive material, and working through technical hurdles with the Apple app development team. It took six months to eventually get it published in the Apple Store and Google Play. I was very excited, and spread the news to all my friends and contacts to download the app. Then the pandemic hit.

My app has revealed the impact of coronavirus on homeless pets. As I write this, Squeaks is the only animal listed, which shows more people have been adopting. While that's great news, it also means fewer rescued animals are coming in. Rescue groups are temporarily shut down and not travelling to pick animals up from southern states. Matthew Bershader, CEO of the ASPCA, explains that in ordinary times, Southern states like Texas, Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida have many more dogs than they know what to do with. Shelters have developed a network of animal transports, sending vans filled with dogs to high-demand areas in the Northeast and Pacific Northwest. He says, "we move about 45,000 animals from the South to the North every year. And those are being moved from shelters that have an oversupply of animals to shelters that have an undersupply." It makes me wonder what's happening to them during the pandemic, and makes me want to work even harder to help.

Before I ever thought about making an app, I learned about this issue as a teen volunteer at an animal shelter called Save a Dog in Sudbury, Massachusetts. I've been working there with a couple of friends over the past three summers. There were some dogs I saw week after week, but after a while they were usually adopted, which gave me hope. I saw how they benefited from the time and attention my friends and I gave them. Within minutes of being let outside, they would go from hostile barking or cowering in the corner, to running around happy and energetic. It's sad to think what might have happened if they had not been not saved.

But my passion for saving homeless animals really started when my family took-in a puppy rescued from a “kill shelter” in Texas. When we first met Cleo, she was extremely shy and hid under a table in the corner of the kitchen. She ruined several carpets, and ran from people who tried to pet her. This could be a sign that she had bad experiences with humans or other animals before she met us. We don't really know, but now that she has so much love and attention, Cleo has become much more affectionate, trusting, and probably wouldn't survive without us. I don't think we could live without her either. She showed me the power of giving a homeless animal a loving home. Statistics show there are a lot like Cleo. According to the ASPCA, each year, approximately 1.5 million shelter animals are euthanized. At the top of this list are the southern states, including Cleo's birth state of Texas.

By putting a lot of animals' photos and descriptions in one easy place for people to scroll through on the Rescue Me Massachusetts app, I'm trying to streamline the process for people looking to adopt. My goal is to expand it by reaching out to more local shelters for permission to add animals. I also want to work directly with groups transporting animals from the South. More animals, and more shelters and advocates promoting my app will make for a greater impact. I hope all this work will help save lives, especially for pets with challenging issues, like my dog Cleo, and the cat Squeaks, who's still at the shelter. They all deserve the love and comfort of home.

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