

Cases of equine abuse appear to be rising in NM (10:16 a.m.)

By Ben Swan / The Santa Fe New Mexican

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SANTA FE (AP) - It's hard to know just how long the group of horses had been starving. The corral itself was in bad shape, and the owners, for whatever reason, held back vital feed.

One by one the horses started dying, and someone would be called to haul the carcass away. One of the horses even had a bit of life left, but not enough to matter. It too joined the other dead horses.

When the fourth of the seven horses started failing, a neighbor picked up the phone and called Natalie Owings. The founder and director of Heart and Soul Animal Sanctuary in Glorieta knew she had little time to act. She sent Paul Vigil, one of her workers, to either buy the starving horses or beg for their lives.

By that time, county animal-control officers had also been called to the La Cieneguilla property, and the owner signed over the starving horse to the sanctuary. But he refused to give or sell the remaining horses.

"He was the worst off," Owings said, gently nuzzling the small, emaciated red pony she's named Montana at her sanctuary. "I'm amazed that he didn't want to take any money. God knows what they were doing with them. I think their contact with what is right is a little bit elusive."

While the owner told Vigil the horse had been sick, Vigil said he doubted the account. "I think they were starving them," he said, noting that when he started taking photos of the corral, the owner opened up the pasture for the other horses and offered the starving horse alfalfa.

The horse, bought at an auction in October, had just a few days left of life, Owings said her veterinarian told her. Now Montana, who still bears bite marks from fighting for food, is gaining 3 to 4 pounds a day.

The horse, about 17 years old, is between 250 and 300 pounds underweight and suffers from anemia and heart murmurs because of the starvation. Those issues should clear up as Montana gains weight, Owings said. "He's a dear horse," she said. "He's really starting to show his personality."

Unfortunately, Montana's story is hardly unusual. The state of horses in New Mexico and the rest of the nation is dire, said Laura Bonar, the equine campaign manager for Animal Protection of New Mexico. Calls to statewide animal-cruelty hot lines show a dramatic increase in neglect and cruelty cases, she said, increasing from about 1-in-6 calls to 1-in-4 calls.

There have been 500 calls to the hot lines for equine neglect, starvation or cruelty, she said, along with reports of 7,000 starving horses on tribal lands. There are little resources for law enforcement or privately funded horse shelters, which have space for only about 250 horses.

The downturn in the economy, coupled with the U.S. ban on horse slaughterhouses, has placed a heavy burden on equines and their owners. The cost of keeping horses has risen steadily, while the price for the majestic creatures has dropped. Bonar said she's heard of auctions where horses were sold for as little as a few dollars a head.

Many horses are neglected, abandoned or sold to slaughterhouses in Mexico or Canada. Thousands of horses - Bonar estimates 9,000 - are inhumanely shipped to their deaths through New Mexico and Texas, she said.

"The word 'crisis' is not an overstatement of what's going on with horses in our state," she said.

The group lobbied the Legislature unsuccessfully for a state fund to help horses last year. In spite of that setback, the nonprofit established the Equine Protection Fund with the help of the New Mexico Community Foundation. It recently received a \$10,000 challenge grant and has created an emergency hay assistance program.

The fund's multipurpose goal is to help end the suffering of equines through several programs, including humane education, providing financial support to horse sanctuaries, subsidizing equine care, training law-enforcement officers in equine cruelty investigations, promoting humane management of wild horse herds and improving animal protection laws.

It's hoped the hay assistance fund will give people options and perhaps cut down on abandonment and starvation, Bonar said. Posters about the program are being placed in feed stores; more information about applying to the fund is available on the group's website, equineprotectionfund.org. There are at least six large-scale horse sanctuaries in the state, although several animal sanctuaries provide spaces for a few horses, like Heart and Soul and Kindred Spirits. Almost all the horse sanctuaries, including The Horse Shelter in Cerrillos, are struggling with decreased donations and an increase of neglected horses.

And the cases are usually indeed dire. Recently, The Horse Shelter took in two groups of young quarter horses on the verge of starvation. One died overnight, said Richard Derr, the shelter's new ranch manager.

Another of the rescued horses, Betsy Ross, looked so relieved to have access to hay that "she just lay down in the scattered hay, basking in the sun," one volunteer said. Betsy, only 8 years old, died a few days later.

The shelter is looking to expand its paddocks to accommodate more horses, Derr said, and is caring for about 38. But more horses are likely to be coming from throughout the state, said Bob Brooks, the former ranch manager and partner of the late Jan Bandler, who founded the nonprofit. "As long as we can get the money to care for them, we can take in more," he said.

Brooks suspects many of the horses coming into shelters now were abandoned in forests or fields last fall. Those horses have foraged through the winter and in bad shape, including Betsy Ross.

"She was so starved, we couldn't help," Brooks said. "It's the first time we weren't able to bring one back."

Many people who find themselves without resources are embarrassed of their circumstances and often hide the horses in remote pastures, he said. That's likely the case of two horses the livestock board expected to transport recently to the shelter. The horses were gone when the officials went to look for them.

The shelter's mission is to rescue and rehabilitate abused, abandoned and neglected horses. Volunteers care and work with the horses in hopes of finding them new homes, although adoptions are down. Only horse has been adopted since Derr started as ranch manager in January.

The idea that people can simply allow animals to starve is appalling to Owings, but too common in New Mexico and around the world. "People have no answer for that," she said. "Don't they have any feelings for animals?"

Many people don't know how to start to find help, Owings said, but need to make an effort. Something as simple as displaying a sign asking for help to feed a starving animal would be a step in the right direction, she said.

In Glorieta, Owings keeps four other horses that were once in the same condition as Montana. They are fed premium senior equine food and all the alfalfa they desire. It's expensive to maintain horses, she said, noting that she's spent about \$500 on Montana alone since he arrived less than two weeks ago.

But knowing the horse is out of danger is a blessing, Owings said. The sanctuary also cares for cats, dogs, poultry, llamas, goats, rabbits and even guinea pigs - just about any animal Owings can safely accommodate.

"He's going to have a splendid life," Owings said. "They are so happy here, especially if they've had a bad time. They have complete peace; no one rides them, and we take them for walks."

Montana has already bonded with Owings, something that comes naturally to the highly socialized animals. "I could sit out here all day and read poetry, and he would love it," she said. "I'd love it too, but I just don't have the time."