

Nine Myths About Equine Rescues Debunked

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Organizations that help horses in need are more important now than ever, but many misconceptions about them remain. Here's how to sort the fact from fiction.

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Most rescues do not have the resources to keep horses indefinitely. Once the horse is healthy, rehoming through adoption is typical.

Sad tales of neglected and abandoned horses seem to be everywhere---in the news, on Facebook, on flyers at your local feed store. Photos of thin horses with drooping ears and dull eyes tug at your heartstrings. You want to help, but it can be hard to know what to do.

I've been involved in the effort to help horses in need for more than 14 years, and I am currently executive director of Bluebonnet Equine Humane Society in College Station, Texas. When I started out, few equine rescues existed in the United States, but today there are hundreds across the country. Most are run by good people doing necessary work, but the rapid growth of the rescue industry has far outpaced regulations to govern operations, and we don't yet have a formal trade association to provide direction and guidelines.

As a result, every so often reports appear about neglected horses discovered at "rescues" run by animal hoarders or by well-intentioned people who found themselves in over their heads. Even worse are the "rescuers" who are simply defrauding their donors. Although these people are the exceptions, their actions give rise to many misconceptions about equine rescues that may stop people from volunteering, donating money or even adopting a horse in need. Because good rescues provide vital services to their communities and the horse industry, it is time to debunk the most common myths and understand the truths behind them.

Myth #1: All rescues are the same

Reality: Each rescue is a unique organization with its own policies and procedures, fundraisers and management staff.

I hear this myth more than any other: When I ask for a donation, someone will tell me they already gave to us---at a fundraiser for a different rescue, or someone who wants to adopt a horse will tell us they have already been approved because they applied at a different organization. I've even been told that "you guys are all just part of one big organization." This misconception becomes damaging anytime the authorities seize animals from a bad rescue for poor care or when adopters believe that a rescue treated them unfairly or misrepresented a horse they took home. Those people might then avoid all rescues under the mistaken belief that we are all the same.



Here are some ways in which rescues differ:

- Private versus 501(c)(3). If a nonprofit organization qualifies for 501(c)(3) designation from the Internal Revenue Service, it doesn't pay income tax on the money it raises and your donations to it may be tax-deductible. 501(c)(3) organizations must have a board of directors and make their financial information available to the public.

Private rescues are often run by a single person or a very small group of people rather than a board of directors. Donations to these groups are not tax-deductible, and they're not required to make their records public. They are required to pay income taxes on any money they receive from fundraisers, adoptions, etc.

- Sanctuaries versus rehoming organizations. Sanctuaries provide lifelong homes to horses in need; they do not offer any for adoption. This means that sanctuaries can help only a limited number of horses: Once a sanctuary is full, it must wait until a horse dies before bringing in another.

Rehoming organizations do place their horses with adopters, but many rescues of this type also offer a limited number of sanctuary spots to horses they deem unadoptable for physical or behavioral reasons.

- Intake methods. Horses can come to rescues from auctions, racetracks, owner donations or law enforcement impoundments in cases of abuse or neglect. Some rescues focus only on horses coming through one route---racetracks, for example---but many take in those from a variety of backgrounds.

Myth #2: My tax dollars support rescues, so they don't need any more from me

Reality: Rescues do not receive local, state or federal funding.

The only exception might be when a city or county contracts with a rescue for assistance in handling neglect cases and stray horses, but most often rescues perform these services at no cost to their local communities. When owners are found guilty of neglect, the judge may order them to pay restitution to the organization for expenses incurred while assisting law enforcement and rehabilitating the horse or horses, but rescues rarely receive the funds they're awarded.

Because we don't receive government support, rescues must raise the funds necessary to care for their horses through adoption fees, fundraising events and direct-mail solicitations. Before you throw out the next invitation to a fundraiser or the letter asking for a donation, please remember that the rescue sending it doesn't see a penny of your tax dollars and needs help for the horses in its care.

Myth #3: Rescues get services and items for free, so their expenses are minimal

Reality: Although many rescues receive some discounted services and donated items, no veterinarian or farrier is always able to work for free or even discount his or her services. And many expenses can't be discounted or donated.

For example, here are some of the 2011 expenses for the organization I run: \$5,178 for insurance, \$1,968 for postage, \$33,061 for veterinary care, \$1,900 for burial expenses for deceased horses, \$10,830 for gas or mileage reimbursements for trailering horses, \$6,875 for training horses, \$8,386 for advertising and \$2,306 for mileage reimbursement for volunteers.

Myth #4: Everyone who works at a rescue is on salary

Reality: Some rescues have paid staff, but many do not.

The majority of rescues rely solely on volunteers. The oldest and most established rescues have paid staff,

but even they rely heavily on volunteers to get everything done.

This means that someone is probably not available immediately to answer your calls or e-mails, and you may have to wait a few days for a reply. It also means that volunteers are often performing their rescue job after work or on the weekends and aren't available during weekdays.

Myth #5: Rescues never enforce their contracts, so I can do what I want with my adopted horse

Reality: The purpose of the adoption contract is to ensure that the horses are placed in good homes. Most rescues follow up on their contracts. Rescue personnel perform follow-up visits not only to see that the horses are cared for, but also to make sure that the adoptive owners are happy with the arrangement. If someone violates the terms of an adoption contract, he or she may lose the horse and be liable to the rescue for the cost of enforcing that contract.

Myth #6: Rescues are happy to take in my old/lame/unsuitable horse

Reality: Most rescues can't take in owner-donated retirees.

Some people want to use rescues as free retirement centers for horses they no longer need while still directing their care and visiting them. Most rescues do not take owner-donated horses, and those that do often have little room or resources for animals with serious medical needs or behavior problems. When a rescue does take in a donated horse, the animal is signed over to the organization and the owner waives all rights, including the ability to visit.

In general, rescues help neglected horses, those whose owners can no longer care for them, and others in serious need. They are not there to take in horses whose owners simply have no further use for them.

Myth #7: Every horse at a rescue is kept until he dies of natural causes

Reality: Rescues have limited funds and must often euthanize horses.

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While answering the phones and e-mails for my rescue, I've often spoken with people who want us to take in their older, ill or injured horse. Often a veterinarian has suggested that they euthanize the horse, but they don't want to. They believe that the best solution is to turn the horse over to a rescue, which will keep him healthy and happy until he dies of old age. However, rescues don't have unlimited funds, and we sometimes must euthanize a horse because we can't spend thousands of dollars to treat an illness or injury.

Donating a horse who needs to be put down is unkind. Not only is he ill or in pain, he is then also uprooted from his home and taken to an unfamiliar place full of strange people and horses. Many scared or nervous horses may never settle in and relax before their life ends, surrounded by strangers. It is also unkind to put rescue personnel into that position. We care for our horses as if they are our own, and every decision to end a life is emotionally draining.

One story remains fresh in my mind. Years ago, our organization took in any horse whose owner didn't want him, and we often received those who should never have been put on a trailer: Moon was one such horse.

Moon developed laminitis, and her owners managed her for several weeks before donating her to us. I followed the care instructions they gave me, but the mare worsened. When my veterinarian arrived to examine Moon, she quickly recommended euthanasia. I knew she was right, but I still cried. I cared about Moon and had hoped for a pain-free future for her. We laid her to rest, and I avoided the barn for two days.

Several months later, Moon's former owner arrived at my barn demanding to see the horse. When I told her we'd put Moon down, her reply was, "Oh, I knew she needed to be euthanized. But I didn't have the heart to do it, so I brought her to you!" Years later, I still ache for the horse I couldn't help and feel anger toward the owner who forced me to make the decision she wouldn't face.

If your horse needs to be put down, please, take care of him at home, in comfortable surroundings. Don't pass that decision on to another person who has had to make that call far too often.

Myth #8: Rescue horses are used up or worthless

Reality: Rescues have all kinds of horses. Some aren't sound for riding, but many can do anything any other horse can do.

Often, when I suggest that someone consider adopting their next horse instead of buying or breeding, I'm told, "I don't want to adopt a horse---they're not good for anything!" The person may go on to tell me she once saw a rescue horse who was lame or blind or crazy. And then I'll hear, "Besides, if no one else wants them, why should I?"

Just because a horse is unwanted or neglected doesn't make him worthless. Many may be sound, well-bred animals who landed in our care after their owners fell on hard times. We have many horses who are young, sound and can be trained for anything.

Storm's story illustrates that point. The courts placed Storm with Bluebonnet Equine Humane Society after removing him from negligent owners. He was emaciated when he arrived, but fortunately, Storm recovered quickly.

After he was trained to ride, he was adopted by a teenage girl who met him and fell in love. And that was the beginning of an awesome career for Storm. He and his rider joined a 4-H drill team, and their wins have included a first place at their district competition. They're also showing in English pleasure, Western pleasure and sidesaddle in open shows, and Storm has made it to the state semi-finals in team penning. He helps athletes who compete in Special Olympics horse shows through the S.H.A.R.E. (Special Horses and Riders Excelling) organization, and he took his rider to the regional and chapter Special Olympics shows in Western equitation, English equitation, trail, barrels and showmanship.

And yet Storm is just one of thousands of rescue horses who are competing, trail riding and working across the country. So the next time you are looking for a new horse, don't overlook your local rescue. You may find a diamond in the rough who can become your next champion and companion.

Myth #9: Donating money or fostering or adopting horses are the only ways I can help

Reality: Rescues need volunteers in many areas.

Running a rescue takes an enormous amount of work, and since most rely heavily on volunteers, there's likely to be a job for you, no matter what your skills. Here are just a few possibilities:

- Trailering. If you have a safe trailer and an appropriate tow vehicle, you may be able to help with picking up horses, taking them to veterinary clinics and transporting them to their foster homes.
- Visiting foster or adoptive homes. Most rescues will inspect potential homes before allowing their horses to go to them, and they may also schedule follow-up visits later. This is an easy job that is a good fit for someone with a camera who enjoys meeting other horsepeople.

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Investigating neglect complaints. The rescue may offer neglect/abuse- investigation training classes, or they may need experienced horsemen and horsewomen who can accompany local law enforcement out on calls.

- Doing routine horse care. Reliable, experienced horsepeople may be needed to do daily chores, such as feeding, cleaning pens or stalls, grooming, or showing horses to prospective adopters.
- Training. Many horses arrive with little or no training, so rescues appreciate help from professional trainers and experienced horsepeople who can help prepare them for adoption.
- Fundraising. Bringing in the money necessary to keep a rescue going is a nonstop concern. Volunteers are always needed to organize and participate in fundraising.

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Marketing, public relations, accounting, writing and more. In many ways running a rescue is like operating a business, and all the same professional skills are needed. If you have a skill you would like to use to help horses, a rescue can help you put your experience to work---and it looks good on a resume, too.

Whether you are looking for a new horse, have some time to give, or can donate money or equipment, I hope you'll consider visiting a rescue and helping out. It really does take the horse community working together to improve the lives of the horses who need us.

About the author:

Jennifer Williams, PhD, is the founder and president of Bluebonnet Equine Humane Society located in College Station, Texas, and the author of the book *How to Start and Run a Rescue*. Williams received her bachelor of science in psychology and minor in equine science from Truman State University, formerly known as Northeast Missouri State University. Later Williams earned her master's and doctorate in animal science from Texas A&M, where she focused her studies on equine behavior, learning and welfare.

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