

Coming Together In The Time Of COVID-19

Here's how camps, riding centers and nonprofits are surviving the pandemic—for now.

By **Christina Keim**

It's been four months since the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic, canceling horse shows, suspending lesson programs and limiting barn access. As states begin to reopen businesses and sanctioned competition resumes, it would be easy to pretend that everything is going back to normal. But what will be the long-term effects of COVID-19 for the grassroots of our industry—from lesson barns to therapeutic programs to equine rescues?

Industry leaders have good reason for concern. After the Great Recession of 2008, U.S. unemployment rates reached 10 percent, and the equine industry was hard hit. Breed registries reported over a 50 percent drop in foal registrations, and members of the American Association of Equine Practitioners recorded a reduction in preventable care visits of nearly 25 percent.

“When the recession hit, people who really loved their horses couldn't put food on the table, and that is sort of what is going on right now,” says Lynn Coakley, president and founder of the EQUUS Foundation, which provides grants to approved equine nonprofits.

But it seems the equine industry has learned some lessons from the past, and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's uniting and mobilizing to support its most vulnerable members, with several major equine welfare organizations compiling databases of resources and fielding hundreds of requests for assistance. New “safety net” programs offering basic supplies to horse owners in need have evolved. These combined efforts have helped sustain riding centers, nonprofits and private owners, for now. But many are still concerned for their future.

“We are all in a holding pattern,” says Jo Anne Miller, executive director and founder of Brook Hill Farm, a nonprofit founded in 2001 to provide equine rehabilitative and placement services as well as equine-

assisted activities and therapies. “We personally are doing fine, but how long that will last, I can't tell you. We're all still worried it's going to crash.”

PANDEMIC PANIC

When governments began to close non-essential businesses, major equine relief organizations logged a nearly immediate surge in requests for assistance.

“The desperation was real,” says Valerie Angeli, vice president of engagement with the EQUUS Foundation and former equine specialist with the American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. “I probably received between 20 and 25 [requests] per week through our social media. They were absolutely panic-stricken about how they were going to take care of the horses they currently have. Volunteers couldn't come, and they are the lifeblood of these organizations that are saving horses.”

In the early days of the pandemic, the EQUUS Foundation also received many requests for foster stalls, particularly around Connecticut, New York and New Jersey, which quickly emerged as COVID-19 hot spots. Program leadership scrambled to secure facilities willing to take on temporary care for animals, but they soon determined that many groups had already found short-term solutions.

“What's so cool as this pandemic continues is that people are finding ways around things,” says Angeli.

With fundraisers and program activities canceled, many groups were forced to dip into cash reserves. The EQUUS Foundation issued \$500 to each of their 200 Guardian charities and facilitated the dispersal of funds donated to them by the AAEP, Brooke USA and the U.S. Equestrian Federation. Due to their specific charter, the EQUUS Foundation can legally only offer funds to

approved, registered nonprofit organizations, which made hearing pleas from private owners and managers of camps and riding stables difficult.

“I was getting 10 or more emails a day in the beginning,” says Coakley. “It was heartbreaking, because you don’t want to say no.”

Ashley Harkins, director of the United Horse Coalition, a branch of the American Horse Council dedicated to supporting horses at risk, says her organization received calls from horse owners, equine business owners and nonprofit entities in roughly equal proportions. The UHC compiled an extensive list of resources, broken down by state and region, and her top priority was connecting people with help available in their area.

“So far, only one person has come back and not been able to get the info they need,” says Harkins. “That to me is pretty promising, signifying that maybe the programs available are helping to fill the needs of those requests.”

Programs designed to support horsemen in times of unexpected crisis are called “safety net” organizations. They usually help owners get through a rough patch by providing hay, grain and other basic supplies or offer professional services, such as veterinary or farrier care, to help keep owners and horses together.

Kathy Lang is the founder and treasurer of Becky’s Gift Equine Relief, a safety net organization serving New Hampshire. In nearly 12 years of existence, Becky’s Gift has helped hundreds of owners, and when COVID-19 hit, Lang anticipated a surge in requests for help—but she’s been pleased to see that, so far, the New Hampshire equine community has been able to manage in other ways.

Managers of equine rescue organizations are collaborating and getting creative in order to help each other survive the pandemic.

SHELLEY PAULSON PHOTO





Safety net organizations help owners get through a rough patch by providing hay, grain and other basic supplies to help keep owners and horses together. *SHELLEY PAULSON PHOTO*

“It is mostly word of mouth, how people hear of us who need us,” says Lang. “It’s been very successful, but it’s about getting the word out and getting people to come forward. People are hesitant to ask for help, but once they connect with us that seems to ease. We are very non-judgmental and respect privacy.”

In the wake of COVID-19, safety net programs have mobilized to create hay banks and move resources to where they’re most needed. Groups like the United Horse Coalition have been facilitating virtual meetings that bring together dozens of affiliate members, where frank discussions about struggles and needs have led to creative solutions and collaboration.

“We are hearing across organizations, across all regions of the country,” says Emily Stearns, program manager of the UHC’s Equine Welfare Data Collective. “If you’re a barn owner who’s lost 80 percent of your lessons, that is very scary. The little guy is going to take a big hit, and if we can’t figure out how to take care of them that is not great. In the past three to four weeks I’ve

seen a huge influx of large-scale emergency grants. We’re really cognizant of what happened back in 2008 and want to get ahead of it before the industry shrinks, and all the horses end up needing someplace to go.”

Summer camp programs have also been impacted, and those that are members of the Certified Horsemanship Association, the largest certifying body of equine professionals in North America, have benefitted from resource sharing through weekly webinars and detailed e-blasts. Christy Landwehr, CHA’s CEO, believes that if state restrictions ease enough to permit day camp programs, the majority of her nearly 2,000 camping-oriented members will be able to maintain their horses. But she’s concerned about residential camp owners, especially in rural areas, who may not be readily able to convert to a day camp format, as well as dude ranches or summer camp programs that may not have the support of an organization like the CHA.

“Most of our members are being told they can only teach one at a time, so they are having to really scale

back, and now some horses aren't being used as much," says Landwehr. "So they are going to lease to people or share with other camps that have more need at this time. There is a lot of creative stuff going on."

While these combined efforts seem to be carrying grassroots horsemen in the short run, they haven't quelled the feeling of uncertainty about the future—that a resurgence of the virus may cause further shutdowns, or that continued worry over COVID-19 might prevent participants from returning to the industry.

"If the bottom falls out, we're all going to be in trouble, all the way around," says Miller, who also serves as one of the leaders of the Virginia Alliance of Equine Rescue Organizations. "Our donors will be less, and the organizations that support us, if they're not bringing in money or are canceling their fundraisers, will be in trouble too."

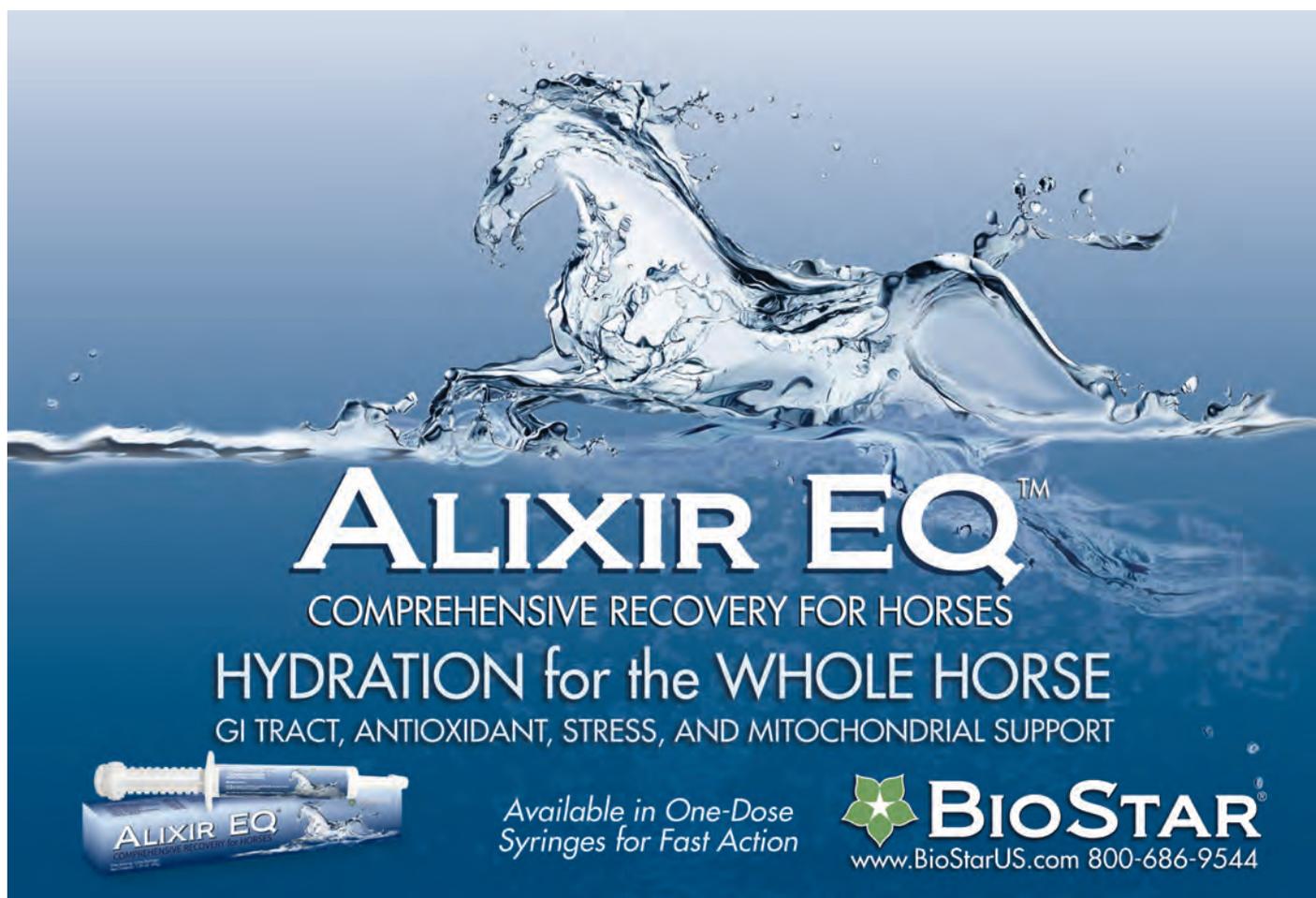
Charitable organizations may be relying on emergency plans and reserve funds for now, but they retain the ability to accept tax-deductible contributions. On the

We're holding our breath for the next few months."

—Emily Stearns

other hand, riding stables rely on fees from lessons, camps and other services. Stearns cites data from an unpublished survey compiled by the Active Interest Media Group and A Home For Every Horse in which 65 percent of respondents stated their business couldn't survive a closure lasting more than three to four months.

"The larger aspects of the industry may be recognizing that and are trying to mitigate that," says Stearns. "But we're holding our breath for the next few months."



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Many riding stables that rely on fees from lessons, camps and other services can't survive a closure of more than three to four months.
DUSTY PERIN PHOTO

PANDEMIC PITFALLS

Weathering the pandemic has necessitated creative thinking.

"People are collaborating a lot more and sharing those ideas," says Harkins.

VAERO was established shortly after the Great Recession of 2008, when the influx of horses in transition almost overwhelmed its 16 Virginia-based member organizations. These equine rescues and sanctuaries

were already collaborating, and the pandemic has only escalated those efforts.

"What I see in the state of Virginia is that we're working as a team, trying to come up with solutions and ideas to keep moving forward," says Miller, who's also been in regular conversation with the Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance and PATH International. "It is really helpful for all involved."

For nonprofits, it seems that size and longevity are assets. Miller says that fiscally responsible equine rescue organizations and therapeutic riding centers usually have a minimum of six months of expenses in the bank; this is actually a requirement for membership in the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, a nonprofit that provides certification for over 150 animal shelters around the world. In addition, many organizations successfully applied for Paycheck Protection Program funding from the federal government; these combined resources have helped sustain paid employees during a period in which income was reduced and volunteers stayed away. But not all groups have access to these resources.

"I think size is the deciding factor," says Stearns. "Larger rescues with more resources and paid social media or marketing people have had more successful pivoting, versus smaller rescues where the owner is doing all the work and the fundraising and the adoptions. When are they going to find time to figure out how to pivot?"

Additionally, established organizations tend to have long-term relationships with donors, some of whom are stepping up by donating their stimulus checks or offering matching funds. When the EQUUS Foundation had to cancel its annual charity luncheon held in conjunction with the Fairfield Horse Show (Connecticut), many repeat guests bought their usual tables anyway—and then some.

"One donor traditionally buys about six seats for \$1,500," says Coakley. "This year, her donation was \$5,000."

Canceled in-person fundraisers have perhaps been one of the biggest challenges, with most if not all converting to some form of virtual fundraising. Becky's Gift ran a "\$5 for Feed" fundraiser and hosted an online auction on Facebook, while other groups offered sponsorship opportunities for program horses.

"Everything has had to go online, and everyone is competing for dollars," says Angeli. "Most charities reach out to their local community, because their work impacts that community directly. But, for example, a lot

of therapeutic riding programs are in rural areas, serving an economically underserved community, and their donors are severely impacted. So any funding that can be coming towards them at this point is appreciated.”

Therapeutic riding programs are sometimes supported by endowments that give them greater financial stability. In addition, centers may hold free leases on some of their horses, giving them flexibility to change herd numbers quickly.

“One therapeutic program near me sent the free leased horses home and went from 10 horses to three,” says Miller. “They can afford to keep the three and to pay the staff. They have plans in place for the horses and are more concerned about getting their clients back.”

Part of being fiscally responsible is not taking on more horses than a rescue group can support, and most VAERO members have seen a reduction in adoptions during the pandemic. While they’re able to sustain the animals they have, not being able to move them along means they can’t accept new animals.

“This is going to put us in a jam down the road when horses need a place to go,” says Miller. “Those of us that are fiscally responsible won’t take something on that we can’t take care of ourselves. I expect to get calls when things start to open up and more local people are in trouble. I don’t think we could take a heavy influx, and if some of the smaller rescues close, what happens to those horses?”

Many rescue leaders share this concern.



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“They are in the business of saving lives, and they are OK-ish right now with what they have,” says Angeli. “But it is preventing them from moving horses out and bringing new ones in.”

While adoptions in Virginia and the greater New York City area may have slowed, in other areas, they’ve actually increased. Some UHC member organizations have reported that their adoption rate has been so high that they’re now working with other groups to facilitate placement of their animals. Industry leaders are hoping that virtual adoption models for small animals can be used to improve outreach for equine adoptions as well.

The Maryland Horse Council has been extremely active in supporting its equine industry during the pandemic, taking a crisis management perspective. One of its newest programs, the Maryland Equine Transition Service, has facilitated the placement of over 140 horses in just under two years. Carrie Hull, executive director of the Maryland Horse Council, describes the METS program as “Petfinder meets *match.com*.” It facilitates the introduction of approved adopters to thoroughly vetted horses in need of new homes via the horse’s current owner. Prior to COVID-19, METS sent an experienced team to complete a detailed onsite health and behavioral assessment of each animal in need.

“We are now assessing virtually,” says Hull. “The owner is needing to complete the forms and offer a lot of the information that we would normally see or get in person.”

Since mid-March, METS has assisted in rehoming 13 horses and supported one owner through humane euthanasia. The MHC has not seen a change in the number of requests for assistance since the start of the pandemic, but inquiries seem consistently related to concerns caused or exacerbated by COVID-19. At the beginning of April, METS announced its collaboration with the Maryland Fund for Horses, a safety net group providing hay, feed and health-related vouchers; they’ve already referred six owners for assistance in caring for their horses.

“It’s a difficult time for everybody, but the major thing is that there has been no drop-off in placement, which really surprised me,” says Hull. “I fully expected to see weeks without placing horses, and it just isn’t the case. In fact, we’ve seen an increase in people who are compassionate, an outpouring of warmth for these horses that need homes. It is so inspiring.”

In working to understand how its industry is faring at

the community level, the MHC coordinated twice monthly calls with the Maryland Association of Rescues and Equine Sanctuaries.

“One thing we have seen across the board is that seizure cases are down,” says Hull. “This is somewhat worrisome, particularly for organizations [that] would normally be taking in the cases, because it’s more likely there are more horses in trouble right now.”

In several Maryland counties, animal control officers were not deemed “essential” during the most restrictive periods, meaning that few to no welfare visits occurred except in cases of extreme emergency.

“It won’t be in the short term that we will see the impact,” says Hull. “It will be in the middle and long term. This is why we are so happy to have the METS program, and it needs to be networked out even more to reach the backyard horse owner, who may not know where to go.”

Everything has had to go online, and everyone is competing for dollars.”

—Valerie Angeli

POST-PANDEMONIUM HOPE

While uncertainty about the future is a unifying concern across the grassroots, industry leaders have hope that some positive changes will come as a result of this unexpected worldwide event.

“I’m loving the new compassion all around,” says Angeli. “A new appreciation for nature, for volunteering and making a difference. Everyone was sort of in a self-centered mode, moving as fast as we can. Everything was at our fingertips, and we had become very materialistic. With all of that in jeopardy and so many things at risk, every bit of life as we know it is changing. It’s kind of a new era of awareness.”

Additionally, new procedures and modifications to existing programming may serve to increase future opportunities. For example, drive-through farm visits

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—Carrie Hull

have allowed some rescues to introduce horses to potential adopters without direct contact, with some programs even turning the experience into a scavenger hunt for specific animals. Hull is hoping that the initial success of the virtual assessment for METS horses could allow for further expansion.

“It’s been a dream to have a program like this nationally, but the major hindrance is the distance,” says Hull. “If we’re able to successfully do a pilot of this virtual assessment, the possibility is endless to do this nationally.”

The AHC has bolstered some of its outreach programs, such as Time To Ride, to further promote growth of the industry.

“Riding is going to be one of the few sports that will be OK for a while with social distancing rules, as compared to soccer or lacrosse,” says Stearns. “Parents are going to be desperate to get their kids out to do something.”

More than anything, leaders hope that the collective experience of navigating a global pandemic will continue to inspire collaboration.

“I just believe that now more than ever, the horse industry must unite and all be for the horse and for the people that work with the horses,” says Landwehr. “Otherwise, I think the pipeline could end up being a problem, and there are a lot of groups out there that aren’t members of anything.” 🐾

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