

11-28-08 Do Horses Celebrate Thanksgiving?

Sometimes a small event opens a window and once you've peered through, there's no forgetting what you saw.

It was an ordinary day and an ordinary kind of phone call. The local animal inspector calls us every once in a while with concerns about an animal's welfare. Sometimes she calls the Board of Health to share ideas and to work as a team to help animals in need; in this case, two horses.

Of course, I wanted to help, but my mind is accustomed to thinking about saving people. At first, I thought of this category as extra and outside of public health. I would discover otherwise. The situation unfolded in rapidly occurring waves of knowledge.

Phase one: There seem to be more horses needing homes than there are stalls and barns and rescue organizations.

Phase two: Sometimes the humane thing to do is to euthanize the animal and some people cannot afford the \$125 for the shot and perhaps \$500 for disposal.

Phase three: The contributions of many people increases the chances of successful adoptions. Transportation, feed, hay, paying vet bills and contributions of cash are all needed in addition to a barn and a caring person.

Phase four: Insider knowledge: A local vet tells us that the abandonment of horses is happening all over the country, especially in places hardest hit by economic hardship. That is when the window opened and I had my first peek at the dark underworld of horse hell. She explained that the recession isn't the only reason for this trend. The last of this country's slaughter businesses closed more than a year ago. However, horses can still be shipped to other countries for slaughter or sold at auction to "killer buyers". As my stomach churned, I wondered, "How could I have not known anything about this?"

The learning curve phases were familiar to me, though. It is exactly like trying to help a person who has been abandoned by family and government and trying to learn the ropes of an insane, Kafka-esque social service network requiring reams of paperwork and months of waiting lists.

As I researched the fate of horses and saw the horrors awaiting them, I realized that the impact to public health was also familiar. An increase in homelessness of the human kind, results in an increase in chronic and communicable disease. New programs are initiated in response. Mobile units are dispatched to treat Hepatitis, AIDS and TB, for instance, in hopes of sparing the already overburdened emergency rooms.

The abandonment of animals brings similar public health concerns. Untreated and unneutered pets risk human health with an increase in feral colonies and a long list of communicable diseases. In addition to an increased risk of the more well known zoonoses such as rabies, unhealthy animals bring the risk of the lesser known diseases spread to humans by contact with sick animals or the environment of sick animals. For instance, an abandoned dog or horse, develops Leptospirosis, wanders to a puddle to take a drink and a while later, children and their pet dog play in the same puddle. The pet dog becomes infected with the spirochete bacteria and develops fever, inflammation, kidney failure and liver damage. The children might be spared if the family acts quickly with veterinarian care and the vet knows enough to interview and educate the family.

Animal caused disease is not new. According to the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, Inc. (NASPHV), *“Infectious disease outbreaks reported during the previous decade have been caused by Escherichia coli O157:H7, Salmonella, Cryptosporidium, Coxiella burnetii, Mycobacterium tuberculosis, ringworm, and other pathogens. Such incidents have substantial medical, public health, legal, and economic effects.”*

The outbreaks outlined in that report were from controlled situations such as petting zoos. To learn more about the unintentional and more difficult to control, consider looking at large natural disaster events, such as the post Katrina efforts. There, CDC learned from USDA, industrial hygienists, sanitarians and the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) veterinary team that the most treated category for humans was infected scratches and bites from interactions with animals. The topic of greatest concern to that team was public health risks posed by dead bodies and the proper disposal of them.

In less than forty eight hours I had learned that horse meat is seen as a delicacy in other countries, there is currently a heated debate on the “no slaughter” issue, with more information needed on the impact of such legislation and that there are a lot of horses being sold for meat simply because it is easier than finding a home for them. I was so naïve on this topic that I assumed the sale of animals for rendering was an economic option for the owners of only elderly or sick animals. Not so. The practice of the easy sale of even young healthy horses is so prevalent, that Suffolk Downs Race Track bans the participation of horse owners who sell to the slaughter business. Apparently, young, healthy race horses are like the supermodels of the equine world. If they can’t win a race, their career is over. A woman who works at Suffolk Downs started a rescue program for the unwanted race horses, sparing the lives of these magnificent animals who may be only three or four years old when they become “worthless”.

The local horses capturing our attention last week went to the Blackfeather Horse Resue Shelter in Plymouth, where the owner will care for them and try to find them homes.

Do horses celebrate Thanksgiving? Sure they do. If they are fed, watered, talked to and petted, they are very thankful. They express their thanks with nods and shakes of the head, relaxed demeanors, nuzzling and sweet talking horse sounds.

For this holiday season, consider contributions to animal shelters, in addition to other worthy causes. If we have family, food, heat and a roof over our head, don’t we have enough?

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