

Opting to adopt?

Find the perfect pet from a shelter or rescue group

by Matthew Brady

BARNABY, A BEAGLE-TERRIER-SPANIEL mix, found his forever home in January with member Marylou McCarthy, her husband, five kids and seven other adopted animals. "I treat animal adoption as a very serious thing," says the Randolph, N.J., resident. "We will have Barnaby forever."

That's why she appreciates highly rated Friends of Randolph Animal Pound, a rescue made up of volunteers who work with the city shelter. Its extensive interview process for prospective adopters includes questions about their lifestyle. "Some might find it a little intrusive," says

McCarthy, who paid \$50 for her dog. "I found it comforting."

More than 5 million companion animals enter animal-control facilities nationwide each year, and more than 60 percent die there — euthanized typically for lack of room or lack of resources to make them well, according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the American Humane Association. Countless other abandoned animals are spared by rescue groups and no-kill shelters.

Sixty percent of Angie's List members polled online who have a pet say they adopted, mainly cats



Photos by Joyce Bambach | Christina Campanello, above left, and Sunny Nowell are animal control officers for the Township of Randolph, N.J., and also volunteers with the Friends of Randolph Animal Pound. Boots, Manny and Oodles the cat are among the pets up for adoption.

and dogs, from a shelter or rescue group, about double the national rate of adoption, according to the ASPCA. Reports on Angie's List reveal these pets have become loved, spoiled and loyal best friends. But when considering a pet, adoption agencies agree it's important to take time to find the right one for your family. "We don't want the impulsive adopter," says Diana Nelson, a

director at the highly rated nonprofit Lange Foundation, which is dedicated to rescuing animals from kill shelters in the Los Angeles area. "We want someone who has thought about what is entailed in keeping these guys forever."

Sources for animal adoptions include open-admission facilities — typically government-owned, obligated to receive all animals and



Photo by John Molene | Susan Wischmeier, left, adopted her golden retriever mix Cooper, middle, from volunteer foster parent Annie Green of Second Chance Animal Rescue in the Twin Cities.

often a kill facility; shelters, typically operated by private, nonprofit groups that do not euthanize; and rescue groups, which may or may not have a building. The latter two groups may place animals in foster care to expand their capacity and nurture animals, while rescues sometimes

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transport animals states away to new foster families or forever homes via volunteer drivers.

Adopting from any of the three saves lives, says Linda Coletta, president of highly rated Houndhaven, a nonprofit shelter in Minneola,

Fla. “If you adopt a dog from a kill shelter, you know you have saved a life and you get immediate gratification,” she says. But adopting from a nonprofit shelter or rescue group accomplishes the same thing. “They are going to replace the animal you just adopted with another animal rescued from death row,” she says.

Highly rated nonprofit groups also ensure the animals rescued are vaccinated, spayed or neutered and treated for medical conditions. “We go the extra mile,” says Nancy Minion, co-founder of highly rated Second Chance Animal Rescue in White Bear Lake, Minn., near the Twin Cities. “If an animal needs eye surgery, we are going to do it.”

About 14,000 animal shelters and rescue groups in the U.S., Canada and Mexico rely on highly rated Petfinder.com, an online searchable database that lists animals available for consumers to adopt. Although the majority of groups on the site offer dogs and cats, rabbits are the third-most popular pet available, says Kim Saunders, vice president of shelter outreach. They interview each adoption group, which must provide a reference letter from a vet to ensure the animals get proper care, before allowing them to advertise available pets on Petfinder.com.

With so many groups, Gail Buchwald, senior vice president overseeing the ASPCA’s adoption center, says to look for ones that have an extensive matchmaking process. She says it’s a sign they’re trying to find forever homes instead of simply making room for more animals. For example, behavior assessments are critical to a good match, she says, and adds something as common as a dog growling at people who come near its food needs to be identified. “That’s not good for a house with young children, but it still could be an adoptable dog,” she says. Cats also require screening for issues such as aggression or shyness.

For member Judi Farkas of Los Angeles, adoption is the only source she considers. Her 20-year-old cat Tucker, aka “Buddha Cat,” came from the Lange Foundation, as did 15-year-old cat Teddi. “The thought

Deciding where to go for Fido

Money might be short, and volunteers always are needed, but pet adoption groups say they always have plenty of lovable, adoptable animals. Choosing a rescue group, public shelter or private nonprofit makes little difference as long as the groups have the same high standards, says Linda Coletta of highly rated nonprofit Houndhaven shelter.

Rescues often don’t have a building, but instead rely on a network of volunteer foster families. “You can’t go see 10 or 20 or 30 animals at one time,” says Nancy Minion of Second Chance Animal Rescue. However, rescue groups like hers offer adoption events. The benefit of being foster-based is socialization, Minion says: “The animal is in a home interacting with people all the time.”

That same benefit is available at a well-run shelter with volunteers interacting with the animals, Coletta says. These groups rely on foster families when animals have special needs.

Breed-specific rescues offer a wider selection of one type of animal, but about 25 percent of dogs at local shelters are pure bred, according to a survey by the American Pet Products Association.

Adoption fees range from less than \$50 — typically at government-operated facilities — to more than \$400 with both nonprofit shelters and rescue groups varying in what they charge, says Kim Saunders of highly rated Petfinder.com.

Claudine Cheung of Friends of Randolph in New Jersey says each group ultimately has the same goal. “[We] are there to save lives,” she says.

of an animal being put to sleep merely because a person didn't adopt it is horrifying to me," Farkas says.

Buchwald says before adopting, ask to see the pet's health records. Member Susan Gayer of Randallstown, Md., thought she had the complete medical history when she adopted Alice Walker Texas Ranger, a soft-coated wheaten terrier, from the Association for Animal Rights in Reisterstown. "Only after we fell in love and got her into our home did our vet examine her and tell us she was very sick," she says.

She paid \$60 to adopt Alice. The vet bills exceeded \$1,700. "She is a wonderful addition to our family, but

"Make sure the animals don't look lethargic."

it would have been more convenient to know ahead of time just how much anxiety and expense I was taking on," she says, giving the group an overall F on the List — its only report. Association manager Kristyne McInnes says she's not aware of Gayer's case, but apologizes for the bad experience. "We would not adopt out a sick animal if we knew about it," she says.

Adopters can get a good feel for a shelter by walking through it. "Make sure the animals don't look lethargic," Buchwald says. The Humane Society of the United

States recommends reporting animal health concerns to the government or nonprofit group that oversees the shelter. Foster-based groups can be more difficult to assess, but Minion says a group's screening policies and documented vet care speak volumes.

Dr. Richard Thompson, owner of highly rated Tavares Animal Hospital in Tavares, Fla., says common problems he sees in animals brought to him by rescue groups include skin and ear irritations, as well as diseases such as heartworm, parvo and distemper. "Those are tough diseases to treat," he says. If health documentation isn't provided, Thompson recommends taking the new pet to a vet for a physical exam, which ranges from \$100 to \$150, he says, not including the cost of any treatments needed. Older animals cost more because they typically need additional lab work, he adds.

To avoid being scammed, groups agree no money should change hands until the match is made. Adoption fees vary based on type and age of animal, location and amount of veterinary care invested in it. Buchwald says she's seen fees as high as \$500, but even then they don't cover a rescue's or shelter's costs. She estimates the ASPCA's New York City shelter spends \$1,500 to \$2,000 per animal while charging \$125 to \$200 for puppies and kittens, \$75 for adult dogs and cats. In general, puppies and kittens cost more than adult dogs and cats,



Photos by Sara Cozolino | Judi Farkas adopted Tucker, 20, from the Lange Foundation several years ago. She rescued her turtle, Rebecca, from an empty house.

simply because of market demand. At the Lange Foundation, an adult dog costs \$250, a puppy, \$350.


Many groups require the animals be returned, albeit without a refund, if the original adopter can no longer keep them. "If they're having problems, we will take it back but we will also help to resolve it," says Claudine Cheung, president of the Friends of Randolph Animal Pound. "We'll pay for dog training. If it's an illness we didn't discover before adoption, we'll pay for the vet."

Ultimately, sources say, adopting is about the animal, not the shelter. "Just because a shelter is run-down,

old, has no money to vet animals, people in this field are all out there to save lives," Cheung says.

Farkas agrees, offering advice from her own adoption experience. "Sometimes you are trying to rescue an animal in dire straits," Farkas says. "You can always make the animal well or make the animal safe. Know what you are financially capable of doing and what you are emotionally capable of doing."

— Additional reporting by
Gretchen Becker

 Have you adopted a pet? Submit a report in our Animal Rescues/Shelters category.