

CORONAVIRUS

Minnesota pet care businesses feeling bite of coronavirus downturn

Before the pandemic, the pet-service industry had just come off a successful decade, doubling in size from 2007 to 2017. With adoptions high during stay-at-home order, Twin Cities pet businesses hope owners will resume their former habits as time goes on.

By **Natalie Rademacher** Special to the Star Tribune | MAY 1, 2020 — 11:38PM

Dog walkers are mostly sidelined by people doing their own dog walking. Pet day care and overnight boarding needs have dried up as people are staying home.

Local pet-care services are feeling the pinch, but are being creative by expanding to offer new services and products to help them stay afloat until regulations to slow the spread of COVID-19 are lifted.

They are also preparing for a possible surge in new business as the economy begins to reopen, thanks to a recent increase in pet adoptions. Adoptions at the animal rescue organization Pet Haven are up 30% compared to this time last year.

Hardship periods in the past have led to more adoptions, said Sitania Kerkinni, co-owner of City Paws Pet Club. "Pets are a safe haven," she said.

About half of the households in the Twin Cities metro have a pet, according to the 2017 American Housing Survey, on par with the national trend.

Before the pandemic, the pet-service industry had just come off a successful decade, doubling in size from 2007 to 2017, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Pet care, excluding veterinary services, was a \$5.8 billion industry that year.

Last year, there were about 2,800 people employed in pet-service industries in Minnesota, up 55% from four years earlier, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. About 200 pet-care businesses, excluding veterinary services, were in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area during the first quarter of last year.

Before the March 28 stay-at-home order, Red Rover Pet Care used to take between 25 and 30 walks with pets a day. Recently, it's gone down to about four.

To help offset a 60% decline in business, Come, Sit, Stay, a Twin Cities pet-care business, is selling cat-themed work-from-home shirts on its website.

City Paws Pet Club, based in downtown Minneapolis, has had a drop-off in clients using its boarding kennel program and had a large reduction in its day-care service. Many clients have paused their memberships due to financial hardships.



ANTHONY SOUFFLÉ • ANTHONY.SOUFFLE@STARTRIBUNE.COM

Teddy was at day care last week at City Paws Pet Club in Minneapolis while general manager Justin Syrovatka brought dogs in.

To make up for lost business, City Paws is developing a personalized training and behavior modification program to make up for lost business. The program will be rolled out after the government stay-at-home order is lifted, and down the road, the business hopes to expand into group classes as well.

Some businesses, like K9SF Dog Training, are continuing their services by offering video-training sessions.

Customers have been stepping up to help these businesses, with some buying gift cards to use once they go back to work. Others are continuing to use dog-walking services, even if they may not need it.

“Clients want us to stay in business. It’s humbling the support we have gotten from our community,” said Rose Schoen, owner of Red Rover Pet Care.

St. Paul resident Barbra Banks now works from home and no longer needs dog-walking services, but she continues to pay Schoen. “For as long as I can afford it, I plan on still paying her even if I’m not getting any service,” Banks said. “I care about her and her business and want to do what I can to make sure her business continues.”

As a result, Schoen has been able to keep paying her employees, which gives her peace of mind knowing they can pay for rent and groceries.

Come, Sit, Stay has been having employees take virtual-training classes to ensure they are still working, even if regular business is down. Owner Megan Sellheim said some customers are medical professionals or business owners and they said it’s important to them that the business stay open to provide service while they are at work.

As these businesses continue to operate, they are adjusting to new recommendations and regulations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended this week that cats, dogs and other animals social distance, after a small number of animals tested positive for COVID-19.

Come, Sit, Stay is no longer bringing dogs to dog parks or other crowded areas because of these recommendations.

People had been thinking about adopting a pet before, but the pandemic has been an opportunity for people to decide they are ready to adopt, said Kerry D’Amato, executive director for Pet Haven.

She said they are ensuring people who are adopting have a plan for how to continue supporting their new pets after they return to work and restrictions are lifted.

Besides adoptions, there has also been a jump in fostering animals at Pet Haven, with more than 300 applications for volunteering and fostering last months compared with the normal 10 to 20 a month.

“We’ve not had this before, not with such great demand,” D’Amato said.

The organization has been bringing in animals from shelters around the state to be fostered here.

While Pet Haven remains open, the Animal Humane Society temporarily stopped doing adoptions last month to protect the public and staff from COVID-19. As they were preparing to close, there was an increase in people wanting to adopt. This helped the Humane Society find a home for most of their animals before halting operations.

On one of the last days adoption was available, 90 of the 250 animals still at the shelter were adopted. Typically, about 10% of animals are adopted on a good day.

While there wasn’t a higher number of animals being adopted, Graham Brayshaw, the Humane Society’s director of animal services, said this is because the organization had fewer animals available as they were closing to the public. Typically there are about 700 animals at the organization.

Natalie Rademacher (natalie.rademacher@startribune.com) is a University of Minnesota student on assignment for the Star Tribune.

