

LOCAL

Movers & Shakers: Animal Companions builds emergency animal care network



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Editor's note: Animal Companions is among the Sun-News 2023 Movers & Shakers — people who will shape Doña Ana County in the coming year.

LAS CRUCES – When Dawn Duncan’s dog, Fergus, made it out of surgery two years ago, she assumed they were out of the woods.

Then she noticed signs of internal bleeding. A weekend call to the vet revealed the lack of a local veterinarian emergency clinic, which meant an hour drive to El Paso.

Las Cruces has lacked a 24-hour emergency veterinary clinic for several years, leaving pet owners with few choices. A shortage of veterinarians in the area compounds the problem.

A need identified

Duncan grew up in Dallas, Texas but said she has wanted to live in New Mexico since she was 16. In 2019, her dream was fulfilled – she, her husband Dennis and their four-legged family made the move.

Duncan said the couple may have rethought the move if they had known the status of emergency animal care in Las Cruces.

“Our dogs are our family, and so we immediately, just as we did with our human doctors, we set up with our vet. We did everything we thought we were supposed to do,” Duncan said.

The couple own two dogs, Fergus, a 9-year-old Schnauzer/Beagle cross, and Barney, a 4-year-old hound mix.

Not long after the family settled in New Mexico, Duncan said she and Barney were involved in a dog attack which sent them both to the hospital. Barney was able to receive emergency care in Las Cruces for his ears and head.

Two years after the move, Fergus got sick.

He underwent surgery for cancer in June 2021. The operation went well and Fergus was sent home on a Friday. However, the couple noticed he might have internal bleeding in the morning. The couple called their vet and were surprised to find that the weekend answering machine directed them to go to El Paso since all emergency services in Las Cruces were closed.

Luckily, the Duncans got Fergus to a clinic in time and veterinarians were able to stop the internal bleeding, following hours of waiting and worry. He made a full recovery and enjoys a life of love and treats with his family.

Fergus was saved, but the lack of local emergency veterinary attention places animal owners in a precarious situation. One that Duncan is determined to change.

Starting a nonprofit

Duncan started researching and found that, like the rest of the country, Las Cruces is experiencing a shortage in

veterinarians, meaning there are not enough providers to sustain a 24-hour emergency clinic.

“I was so upset, so distressed (following Fergus’ ordeal), so I wrote a letter to the editor, which was published, and then I thought, ‘well, you can sit around and complain about this or you can do something,’” Duncan said. “I thought, ‘well, what if we got a citizen action group together and we all worked to change this.’ And so that’s where my mind was.”

She said she conferred with a veterinarian who founded the Red River Animal Emergency Hospital in Fargo, North Dakota.

She explained that the Minnesota hospital was created through a “consortium” of all the veterinarians in the area who after raising funds for about five years, built a new clinic and hired and trained a full staff. Duncan based her blueprints for New Mexico on the Fargo clinic.

Duncan said bringing all the local clinics together was challenging because of non-compete clauses, shortages and overwork during the pandemic.

Duncan pivoted to establishing a nonprofit organization she named Animal Companions. While they navigate the ins and outs of starting such an organization, Duncan said the stakeholders of Animal Companions decided to partner with Community Foundation of Southern New Mexico. Animal Companions raised over \$60,000 in its first year.

The group estimates it would cost \$5 million to get the emergency clinic up and running.

Raising funds to create the future clinic is one goal of Animal Companions, but Duncan is also working on other incremental changes. One such project involves working with the eight vet clinics in town to recruit more veterinarians and attract veterinary students to the area. Her background is in higher education and she has put her skills to work.

Duncan and volunteers work to connect with veterinary schools across the country to establish practice partnerships and externships with the local clinics, which she hoped would lead to more recruitment opportunities for permanent positions. This also allows clinics to expand its services.

To create an incentive for veterinarians to practice in Las Cruces, Animal Companions also planned to establish scholarships for debt relief when students graduate.

Las Cruces will not see a fully functional emergency animal hospital for years, but Animal Companions connected Las Cruces to the [national VetTriage program](#). Pet owners are able to virtually connect with a licensed veterinarian 24/7 for \$50 – which is paid per problem, so owners can call multiple times for their pet. Professionals are able to dispel owners' worries or refer them to emergency services in more emergent cases.

Also in the new year, community members can expect to see events hosted by Animal Companions providing education about preventative health care for pets, chipping, spay and neuter and other topics. All while having fun with their animals.

“If we have a healthy community of animals, we have a healthier community of human beings. There is a direct correlation between the mental health of human beings and how they interact with animals,” Duncan said.

Animal Companions boasts over 100 volunteers, and it is always welcoming new people. Duncan explained that volunteers can be as active as they choose to be and involved with areas that match their skills. Some people help with making national connects, others with local connections, some with fundraising events and still others write a personal check. One area in need of extra help is grant writing.

Current volunteers Linda Mandel and Candis Stern both got involved quickly with Duncan’s cause. They both had similar stories of moving to Las Cruces and prioritizing their pet’s care.

Mandel marveled at the speed at which Duncan has made progress toward the end goal.

“I can't believe what's been accomplished: the silent auction, the volunteer group, ... the board,” she said. “We moved here during COVID (-19), even though I knew my relatives and we live on this little hard to find street that's

kind of quiet, it was hard to make friends and have a social life. And so now it's kind of coming together. I've made new friends and it's just a win-win.”

Stern added that in addition to establishing the 24-hour clinic, she hopes the nonprofit can help create more pet-friendly areas around town. Spaces where people can let their pets off leash and know they will be safe from running away or from other aggressive dogs.

The hope is Animal Companions can create a safe and caring pet community in Las Cruces which could ultimately impact the county's feral animal issues, along with overpopulation and animal abuse.

“I am in love with Las Cruces. I will live here the rest of my life, I certainly hope, and I want to contribute. I never dreamed I would be doing this, not in a million years,” Duncan said. “But ... I think it's part of why I'm here.”