

When Love Is Not Enough

Compassion fatigue and burnout are recognized as some of the biggest threats to the animal welfare movement.

When a rescue accumulates far more animals than it can properly care for—it is often called rescue hoarding.

It frequently begins with good intentions rather than malicious ones, although neglect can become severe and criminal as conditions deteriorate.

There are several kinds of help available, though many people don't seek it until the situation has become critical.

Some of the most important forms of support include:

- Compassion fatigue programs. Organizations increasingly recognize that rescuers experience trauma similar to emergency responders. They offer workshops, peer support, and counseling specifically for people in animal welfare.
- Peer mentoring. Some rescue networks pair newer or struggling rescue operators with experienced leaders who can help them set limits, reduce intake, and build sustainable practices.
- Crisis intervention. When a rescue realizes it has become overwhelmed, some regional coalitions will help with emergency foster recruitment, veterinary assistance, fundraising, or transferring animals to other rescues before conditions spiral out of control.
- Mental health resources. Burnout, depression, grief, and moral injury are common among rescuers. Some therapists specialize in veterinary and animal welfare professionals, and that expertise is increasingly being extended to rescue volunteers.

One organization that has done a great deal of work in this area is the Association for Animal Welfare Advancement, which has promoted research on compassion fatigue and resilience. The Humane Society of the United States has also published guidance on preventing burnout and building healthier rescue organizations. Another important voice is Maddie's Fund, which offers free educational resources on shelter leadership, volunteer management, and sustainable rescue practices.

One of the saddest realities is that rescue hoarding often follows a predictable pattern:

1. A rescuer says “yes” to every animal.
2. Resources can’t keep up.
3. The rescuer becomes isolated and ashamed.
4. They stop letting others see what’s happening.
5. Animals begin to suffer despite the rescuer’s continued belief that no one else will care for them.

By the time authorities become involved, the person may have been struggling for years.

Communities are often quick to celebrate heroic rescuers, but much slower to ask, “Who is taking care of the rescuer?”

That shifts the conversation from blaming people after a disaster to asking what early warning signs friends, volunteers, veterinarians, donors, and shelters should recognize—and what kind of support might keep a dedicated rescuer from reaching the breaking point in the first place.