

# Sheltering domestic rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) in Canada and the USA during the COVID-19 pandemic and RHDV2 emergence: a cross-sectional mixed-methods survey of intake, care, and management (2017–2022)

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## Sample



Online survey  
87 organizations



70 shelters  
17 rabbit rescues



59 Canada  
28 USA

## Resource-intensive management practices (2022 data)

**94.3%** coordinate foster care

**82.8%** intake waiting list

**78.2%** personnel pick up  
strays

**78.2%** transfer in from other  
organizations

**75.9%** transfer out to other  
organizations

## Results

Intake models (2017-2021 data): (i) All types of intakes, (ii) Stray/abandoned only, (iii) Owner surrenders only

For stray/abandoned rabbits, 0.6x fewer intakes in 2020 vs 2021 ( $P = .0008$ )



COVID-19 effects, RHDV2 effects, and organization type (shelter vs rabbit rescue) were associated with decreased intakes in all models (all  $P < .05$ )

## Themes based on comments about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on rabbit care:

- Decreased intakes & adoptions
- Concurrent operational challenges (e.g., RHDV2)
- Sustained resource constraints

“  
Reduced donations,  
reduced foster  
capacity, reduced  
access to supplies  
[Participant 12]

”

## Conclusion

Many organizations experienced overlapping challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic including RHDV2. These challenges limited intake capacity and strained management resources. Findings suggest opportunities for expanded community partnerships, more fosters, validated strategies to get rabbits adopted from shelters and rabbit rescues faster, and emergency planning to support organizational sustainability and to safeguard rabbit welfare.

“They are one of the hardest species for us to find room in a foster home for, take some of the longest time getting adopted out, and there are almost always several on our waiting list”. [Participant 40]