

The Austin Guinea Pig Rescue is a non-profit charity that has been saving guinea pigs from poor living conditions since 2005, but they still struggle to keep their rescue afloat.

“That’s a major problem we’re having, people just dumping their guinea pigs at the pet store,” said guinea pig lover Elizabeth Mack as she recalled Zoro's backstory. This tiny, fluffy and intelligent animal is one of many in this charity.



Volunteer Cera Thornton hands Zoro to another volunteer, Chris Varady, at an Austin Guinea Pig Rescue work event on Nov. 5, 2023 at the rescue’s intake house.

They have currently placed 83 guinea pigs in private foster homes, and Mack, the rescue’s president, has renovated a part of her home to run as the rescue’s intake house which holds 50 right now. These numbers are especially high as there was an increase in rescued guinea pigs after the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I had to build out that room that leads to the garage because there’s so many animals in the house. It was \$3000,” Mack said. “If we took every guinea pig in the state of Texas that’s trying to be surrendered to us we’d have a thousand animals.”

Even though the Austin Guinea Pig Rescue aids many of these helpless animals, they have to turn away even more cases. This is due to a lack of funding and a lack of foster home spaces suitable for the guinea pigs, especially as breeding issues became exponentially worse in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“There’s a breeder that’s been dumping pigs consistently for over a year, and over 50 of the animals we have taken in have come from that breeder,” Mack said.

She explained that while everyone was at home during the months of mandated quarantine, guinea pigs were in high demand as people in isolation were craving company. When the pandemic subsided, breeders had over-bred their animals, so many dumped surplus babies on the streets or in unsafe situations.

“We get hoards of them,” Mack said. “So three months ago we got a phone call in Corpus Christi that someone had left 30 guinea pigs in a tiny white laundry basket and they were stacked three deep. Fifteen of them were pregnant females, so we went from 15 animals to 52 in four weeks.”

Not only is over-breeding a problem in and of itself, but it can also cause some of the animals to have medical issues, according to Mack. Through the intake house doorway and just a few feet into the kitchen, the dining room windows shine a light on a handful of well-cared-for guinea pigs that require extra attention for their medical needs.

“Allie has a herniated disk, Keller is partially deaf and blind, and one was bred almost to death so she leaks,” Mack said, while pointing to several of the pigs. She’s now permanently with the rescue.”

She said they usually take guinea pigs from shelters because their mission is to rescue them from euthanasia. However, they also make case-by-case exceptions for hardship cases and medical complications.



Austin Guinea Pig Rescue president, Elizabeth Mack, clips Sugar's nails on Nov. 5, 2023, with help from volunteer Cera Thornton.

Many guinea pig rescues shut down over the pandemic, so the Austin Guinea Pig Rescue is now servicing almost all of Texas.

“Nothing’s changed though,” Mack said. “Our funding hasn’t changed, our number of volunteers hasn’t changed.”

Another challenge the rescue faces is spreading education about breeding and guinea pig care.

Amy Constant, a secretary and foster for the Austin Guinea Pig Rescue board of directors said many applicants do not realize these animals are not just kids’ pets.

“When I talk to applicants, I'm always asking, where are you putting them?” Constant asked. “Because they need to be loved; they need to be in the center of the family. I feel like a lot of people think they can just put their guinea pig cage in the corner of the kids' room and that it'll be fine there.”

However, the Austin Guinea Pig Rescue’s goals for the future will help fight this lack of education and hopefully expand the rescue to provide more homes to guinea pigs, according to Mack.

She said the organization wants to maintain a consistent foster base, increase its funding, register new volunteers and continue educating guinea pig owners and breeders.

Cera Thornton, a volunteer who currently fosters two guinea pigs for the rescue, said many people often don’t realize how guinea pigs can mix well with other types of pets in the home.

“We will leave the door to the guinea pig room in our house open when we’re home, and our dog just goes in to watch them,” Thornton said. “We have one cat that will jump into the pin with them and just lay there to hang out.”



Thornton and Mack work together to clip Kevin Bacon’s nails and weigh him at the work event on Nov. 5, 2023.

Mack said the rescue also runs a sanctuary program, which allows people to sponsor guinea pigs that are less likely to be adopted, mostly those with medical needs. Sponsors can work with fosters to arrange visits with the pigs they support.

“Having small mammals may not be for everyone, but there’s just something so special about them,” Thornton said. “They bring a different kind of joy, just like dogs or cats bring their own, so do guinea pigs.”