

Advocates press for no-kill policy at county shelters

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Lane County animal shelters kill dogs and cats at twice the rate necessary to relieve the animals' suffering and remove vicious dogs from the streets, say animal welfare activists who promote a drastic reduction in killing.

The government-run Lane County Animal Regulation Authority and the nonprofit Greenhill Humane Society killed about 3,400 dogs and cats by lethal injection last year, shelter statistics show. This amounts to 52 percent of the cats and 16 percent of the dogs that passed through the shelter doors.

"We're required to take stray animals in. We sometimes have to euthanize healthy, adoptable animals to make room," said Mike Wellington, who oversees the government shelter. "We just don't have enough adopters, and we don't have enough space to hold the animals longer."

Today, in cities across the nation, animal welfare advocates are challenging the idea that shelters have to kill friendly, reasonably healthy dogs and cats or else be overrun with animals.

They say a shelter running at peak efficiency can find homes for almost all stray and abandoned animals. They also say that rallying a community around a "no-kill" ideal brings manifold increases in enthusiasm, volunteers and dollars to the shelters.

"We can become a no-kill community," said Diana Robertson, who's spearheading the Lane County effort. "We need people to set a high standard for the shelters and to help out at the shelters."

No-kill movement

The drive to no-kill shelters began in 1994, after Richard Avanzino, the director of the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, tore the decompression chamber - now seen as a hideous way to kill animals - out of his shelter, according to Animal People, an international advocacy newspaper.

He appealed to the affluent public in the city by the bay to donate large sums to keep the animals alive. With the money, he launched a host of adoption, foster care, medical treatment and behavioral therapy programs that got most animals into homes. Today, San Francisco has the lowest rate of shelter killings for a large city at 2.5 animal deaths per 1,000 residents.

By comparison, the Lane County rate is 10 dog and cat deaths per 1,000 residents per year.

Now, 10 local animal welfare groups - collectively called the Overpopulation Crisis Coalition - have teamed up with county Commissioners Faye Stewart and Bill Dwyer to bring national no-kill firebrand Nathan Winograd to town in July to advise shelters how to lower the death rate. Or even adopt the no-kill philosophy.

"It's the ideal," Dwyer said. "It requires tremendous resources and commitment. It works in other places; whether or not we have the resources and the commitment remains to be seen."

The first order of business in a no-kill community is establishing a low-cost, high-volume spay and neuter clinic, Winograd, a former prosecutor and animal welfare lobbyist said in a telephone interview.

Wealthy communities sterilize their dogs and cats at four times the rate of their low-income counterparts, giving lie to the assumption that pet owners are simply irresponsible, Winograd said. "It's not culture. It's not irresponsibility. It's cost," he

said.

Lane County governments are boosting their spay and neuter efforts with up to 4 percent of the proceeds from dog licensing fees, but it's not enough to take care of the big job. Clinic waiting lists are long and the cost is prohibitive for some pet owners. The Portland Feral Cat Coalition brings its mobile unit to Eugene every other month, but the numbers of fertile felines keep on coming.

The Willamette Animal Guild hopes to hire a veterinarian and a technician and open a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter clinic in October at the intersection of Royal Avenue and Highway 99.

They want to sterilize 25 dogs and cats a day, five days a week, 48 weeks per year.

"There are thousands and thousands of animals without homes. Society thinks, 'Well, we'll just kill them all,' " guild member Jill Winans said. "What we're trying to do is cut off the source."

A cat can have three litters a year with an average of three or four kittens each, which, in turn, can be impregnated within five months. One abandoned cat can lead to a colony.

Lane County shelters took in 4,496 cats last year and killed 2,331 of them.

"People come in with litters and litters during kitten season that test positive for feline leukemia or whatever," said Johnni Prince, the Greenhill executive director. "There's just so many cats that no one is being responsible for."

It's also critical that shelters sterilize every dog and cat they adopt out because as many as 20 percent of adopters won't follow through, he said.

Winograd ran the Ithaca, New York, shelter from 2000 to 2003. He brought the agency's kill rate to the lowest in the nation: 1.9 cats and dogs per 1,000 residents.

His costs for holding a cat the required number of days, cleaning its kennel, killing the animal and getting rid of the carcass was \$100. But the cost of sterilization was \$25.

Embracing the rescuers

To pull off no-kill, the shelters need an extensive foster care program to ease the pressure on shelter space, to raise newborn animals to adoptable age, to retrain older animals with behavior problems and to make sure that all of the animals are healthy, relaxed and ready to show off to prospective adopters.

To do that, shelters need a vast cadre of volunteers to take in cats and dogs for weeks or months, Winograd said. He recruits people who would enjoy a part-time pet but can not make a long-term commitment, such as military enlistees and undergraduate students.

Winograd found his wellspring of foster parents among the animal rights activists. This is a group that shelter managers usually keep at arm's length, he said, because they're sharply critical of the practice of killing marginally sick or unwanted animals.

The Greenhill Humane Society and the Florence Area Humane Society have foster care programs, but the Lane County Animal Regulation Authority does not.

Robertson said Lane County would supply the person power, if LCARA would accept and allow more volunteer help.

"If we were to become more of a no-kill community, tenfold people would want to volunteer because it would be a completely happy experience," Robertson said.

Shelters - both government and nonprofit - must be accountable to the constituents who pay their bills, Winograd said.

But they also are responsible to the animals, he said.

"You reduce other costs, like killing, carcass disposal, unnecessary holding times, reducing your length of stay, relying on volunteers, making sure your staff is really performing at their best - because when staff cut corners, not only are they stealing from the taxpayers, they are literally stealing the lives of the animals," he said.

Let me introduce you

When adopting out animals, it's location, location, location - and most shelters are in distant corners of cities, such as at the agricultural fringes or among warehouses in industrial areas.

In many cases, they have less than public-friendly hours, Winograd said.

Winograd gets volunteers to take their groomed and happy charges to adoption booths at busy places, such as street fairs or financial districts.

Winograd figures that the number of pet-owning households that become available every year through attrition is about two times the rate of shelter killing so that in theory, adoption could replace all population-control killing.

"It's not a problem of too many animals/not enough homes," he said. "It's a problem of market share."

In Palo Alto, he helped establish an adoption center in a shopping mall where a pet store was selling kittens for \$50 each. The shelter then sold its kittens for \$60, but they were spayed, they had their shots and they came with a bag of food and a basket of goodies - plus the warm feeling of saving an animal, he said.

"We were competing head to head. We were thinking like a business and we were out-maneuvering and capturing a market share," he said.

Lane County shelters have tried some of these tactics, such as weekend adopt-a-thons, but there are still too many animals at the shelter.

For nearly a decade, volunteers for the Florence shelter have driven dogs and cats to the Eugene PetSmart to look for potential pet owners every Saturday and Sunday. But all through the weekdays, the store's adoption center sits idle.

Winograd said he's conducting a study of the shelter system in Lane County. He has asked LCARA and Greenhill for detailed accounts of their policies and procedures. Winograd will tour the shelters on July 20, then make recommendations on how to improve their effectiveness and efficiencies - "not to embarrass them but to help them do better," he said.

In the past 1 1/2 years, he has done similar work-ups at 39 shelters in a dozen states. Some of them have adopted a no-kill program, others didn't, he said.

"If they do not, there's a body count attached to it," Winograd said. "If they do, the death rate will plummet. I guarantee it because it's never failed."

NO KILL

Nathan Winograd will spread his no-kill philosophy for abandoned cats and dogs.

Public presentation:

6 p.m. to 9 p.m. July 20 at Harris Hall on the University of Oregon campus

Information: E-mail Diana Robertson at dianar@epud.net

Winograd's Web site: www.nokillsolutions.com/

DEATH RATE

Animal welfare advocates divide the number of shelter kills by the human population in a community to compare shelter systems. Here are animal deaths per 1,000 residents per year:

National rate: 15.5

Northeast: 3.6

West: 12.1

Oregon: 9

Lane County: 10

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