

Shelter under the spotlight

A report recommends ways to save the lives of more animals

By Matt Cooper

The Register-Guard

Published: Thursday, September 20, 2007

From euthanasia to reducing "kennel stress," the Lane County animal shelter should make changes to ensure that more cats and dogs are adopted and not put down, a task force said in a report released Wednesday.

The Lane County Animal Regulation Authority should develop a better policy on euthanasia, build a network of foster homes, promote the trapping, neutering and release of wild cats and make other changes, the Save Adoptable Animals Task Force said in a 40-page report.

The report, ordered by the Lane County commissioners earlier this year, is a response to what board Chairman Faye Stewart said is a top issue for county residents: animal welfare.

"Out of the three years I've been a commissioner, we've had more public input, more public involvement (on this issue) than on any other issue," Stewart said Wednesday. "We need to do a better job to make people feel good (about county animal services)."

The task force held a public meeting on the report Wednesday night, and the board will review the 30 recommendations in October.

Stewart hopes many will be approved, but that means walking the tightrope between the public's concern for animals and a shelter that says it can't keep up with the negligence of the people who own them.

Last year, the shelter received about 2,000 dogs and put down almost 300 because they weren't deemed adoptable or because there was no room. Slightly more than half of the 1,600 cats were put down for the same reasons.

Shelter manager Mike Wellington characterized those rates as acceptable, putting him squarely at odds with task force co-chairwoman Molly Sargent.

"You can sway statistics any way you want," said Sargent, who runs a dog-grooming business. "(The county shelter) is what I would consider a 'catch-and-kill' facility. It should be run with the thought of trying to save every adoptable animal that comes into that shelter."

Of paramount importance, the task force said, is the establishment of a written euthanasia policy and a panel to oversee which animals must be put down.

"Euthanasia is mercy killing," Sargent said. "It's for animals or people who have a grave prognosis or medical condition. Eight hundred cats" - the number put down by the shelter last year - "did not have that problem."

Wellington said killing animals is unquestionably the shelter's last resort but also a hard reality given the numbers. The shelter is updating the euthanasia policy so that only supervisors and managers - not staff - can approve its use, he said. But Wellington doesn't feel that a review panel is necessary or realistic given time constraints and the large number of animals that the shelter receives.

Other task force recommendations include better hours for the public, more foster families, trap-neuter-release programs for feral cats and even a new name - "Lane County Animal Services."

But Wellington said the report was written by animal-welfare advocates and animal activists, and that the larger community doesn't necessarily support all that the groups espouse.

He questioned some of the recommendations and said that the agency is already forward-thinking.

Wednesday, for example, marked the first anniversary of the shelter's partnership with PetSmart to adopt animals out of the store in north Eugene. The shelter is also hiring a volunteer coordinator, Wellington said, but incorporating task force recommendations will require a big jump in volunteer help.

"If you take the report as a whole and really analyze it, a lot of this stuff we're already doing," Wellington said. "And if we're not doing it, we're attempting to do it and don't have the resources to do it completely."

Carl Friedman, director of the San Francisco Department of Animal Care and Control, said public shelters and animal advocates often fight like cats and dogs. But to make change, he added, both sides must focus on their shared concern for animals.

"I guarantee (the shelter) can't solve the problem by themselves," Friedman said. "Those communities that generally don't have a good (adoption) rate are those where everybody's too busy fighting with each other to work together to save the lives of animals."

RECOMMENDATIONS

A task force recommends that Lane County Animal Regulation Authority:

- Write a policy on when to put animals down
- Use foster programs
- Trap, neuter and release feral cats
- Spay or neuter all LCARA animals
- Improve medical and behavior treatment
- Work with rescue and adoption organizations
- Increase adoption
- Relax limits on companion animals
- Reduce "kennel stress"