

# LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS

## **Veterinarians see uptick in distemper cases from animal shelter**

**By Diana M. Alba Sun-News reporter**

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LAS CRUCES — The Hadfields adopted Clancy, a fuzzy blonde, mixed-breed puppy, from the Las Cruces-Doña Ana County animal shelter around the start of the year.

But the dog — a Christmas present for their 10-year-old son, Sandy — soon showed signs of illness, said Julienne Hadfield of Talavera.

"He picked his favorite puppy, and we brought it home, and within the first day, it seemed like it was running a temperature," she said.

She said they took the dog to a veterinarian, who indicated the puppy could have distemper, a viral disease that can lead to severe nervous system damage. Hadfield authorized a distemper test and began treatment for the disease. Four days later, the results came back positive.

Hadfield said the family administered the medication faithfully and after a while thought Clancy was in the clear. But last week, the puppy began limping. Thinking the dog might have been injured, Hadfield returned to the vet Monday and received bad news: The limping was a sign the virus had invaded the dog's nervous system. The vet recommended euthanasia to keep the puppy from suffering. So Clancy was euthanized that day.

The Hadfields also learned the vet practice, Arroyo Veterinary Clinic, had seen an uptick in the number of dogs from the shelter that were being diagnosed with distemper.

Amber Thompson, a veterinarian at Arroyo Veterinary Clinic, confirmed that Thursday. She said they have tested eight positive cases since Nov. 3, with seven of those coming since Dec. 1. Of the eight cases, Thompson said, three animals developed the severe, neurological form of the disease and had to be euthanized.

She said that infection rate is greater than what the practice generally sees in shelter animals and a higher rate than what is occurring among other dogs treated in the clinic.

"In talking with the other vets, we're seeing an increase in the animals coming from the shelter, and it's not an increase we're seeing in animals from the general population," she said.

Beth Vesco-Mock, director of the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley, acknowledged the facility has seen distemper in dogs at the facility since October. She said "there's more than I'd like to see," but she wouldn't go so far as to call it an outbreak.

In that time, Vesco-Mock said, roughly 1,220 dogs have entered the facility and left because they were adopted out, returned to their owners or sent to rescue groups. Of those, she said, she's had 16 reports, less than 2 percent, of dogs that were later diagnosed with distemper. She said her figures don't include euthanized animals, which aren't tested for the disease.

"It's sad, but it's not as bad as some people portray it to be," she said. "If you only have a few vet offices, and some may have seen five or six or seven of (the cases), they think that's a large number. They don't realize that 1,200 animals left the building in that period of time."

She said many of the shelter animals haven't been properly cared for before entering the facility. The virus is present at the shelter because it's present in the community's pet population, she added.

In addition, Vesco-Mock said, the shelter lacked a veterinarian for much of last year, which meant dogs being adopted out had to wait longer in the facility to be spayed or neutered. That increased the time they could have been exposed to illness, she said, and increased stress on animals, which has a negative effect on their immune systems.

Thompson said exposure to the disease can result in three possible outcomes.

"If they have adequate immunity, through vaccinations, they can be exposed and won't come up with any symptoms," she said. "If they don't have adequate immunity, they'll get the upper-respiratory illness that can turn into secondary bacterial pneumonia. You can also see ... vomiting and diarrhea. Some of those cases fight it off."

And the third possibility, Thompson said, is that the dog will appear to get over the respiratory and gastrointestinal illness, but, weeks or months after that point, begin showing symptoms of a nervous system infection.

"The neurological form usually necessitates euthanasia because it causes seizures," she said.

Thompson said even if a dog recovers from the less-severe form, it can remain infectious "for months afterward and thereby become a source of infection for other dogs."

Puppies can begin a series of distemper vaccinations as young as six weeks of age, Thompson said. They must then get a vaccination every three to four weeks until they're 16 weeks old.

Vesco-Mock said the shelter vaccinates all dogs that enter the facility against the disease, except those that are immediately slated to be euthanized. She said the facility doesn't knowingly adopt out animals with distemper, but it's not always easy to detect.

"They can be harboring distemper in their bodies before they're even showing signs," she said.

There's a window of time between birth and six weeks of age — the earliest age to vaccinate — in which puppies can contract the disease.

Thompson said her practice has alerted the shelter about the high rate of distemper being found in shelter-adopted pets.

"They've indicated they're trying to find solutions," she said.

Hadfield said her son became very attached to their puppy and was heartbroken when it was euthanized. She said she has been an advocate of the shelter in the past, but she's disappointed the facility is adopting out pets with distemper, especially because they could infect other healthy dogs a person already owns.

"What I'm asking is they properly examine them and treat them for any disease, and if they can't, what is the reason for the (animal shelter)?" she said. "It may be causing an epidemic by them being irresponsible."

Hadfield said her family spent about \$450 treating Clancy. She said she's guessing there are people who have adopted dogs with the virus, but weren't able to afford to take them to the vet when they became ill.

Vesco-Mock said she sympathizes with people who have lost pets to distemper, but said the shelter can't guarantee an animal is entirely disease-free when it's adopted out.

"We tell them that when they adopt," she said. "We explain an animal may have been exposed to parvo or distemper, ringworm or upper-respiratory-tract infections."

Vesco-Mock said the adoption fee is not refunded in those cases, but the shelter will give a person another dog.

Asked if the distemper rate at the shelter can be reduced, Vesco-Mock said that depends on pet owners. If dogs didn't enter the facility with the disease, she said, there wouldn't be a problem.

"What the general public needs to understand is distemper is out in the general population, and they need to have their own animals vaccinated," she said.

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**Animal shelter**

Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley

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Hours: noon to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday; noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday