

Long road to no-kill: Shelter director says the goal is still possible

By Diana M. Alba/Sun-News reporter

Posted: 05/02/2010 11:03:52 PM MDT

LAS CRUCES — A blackish-brown puppy flattened itself against the metal examining table on a recent day, as shelter director Beth Vesco-Mock slipped a needle into a patch of skin behind the neck.

Despite its anxious eyes, the dog remained calm, as hydrating fluids flowed into its body, treatment for parvo the puppy may have contracted at the shelter. Vesco-Mock said the dog is likely to survive.

The job is one typically handled by the shelter's veterinary technician, who was out of the office, meaning Vesco-Mock had to step in.

Vesco-Mock, also a veterinarian, said there aren't many tasks she hasn't done in the two years she's been at the facility. Last week was the anniversary of her starting date.

In that time, Vesco-Mock said she's implemented a number of changes. She said the shelter is making headway in reducing euthanasias, as well as addressing the larger problem of pet overpopulation in Doña Ana County.

The puppy, for instance, is part of a program begun last November, called foster-to-adopt, that allows would-be adopters to foster an animal in their homes before the shelter turns over ownership of the pet. This keeps animals from becoming infected at the shelter or gives them a chance to get well, before the stressful spaying or neutering surgeries pets must have before they can be adopted out permanently. Vesco-Mock said it allows her to save more animals.

"It's expensive to run, but, unfortunately, I think it's something that has to be done at this point in the shelter's life," she said.

About 210 animals were in the foster-to-adopt program last week. Another 90 animals were in the regular foster program, meaning they're housed in volunteers' homes until being adopted permanently.

And still another 476 were housed in the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley building, 3551 Bataan Memorial West.

Other changes include upgrades to the building — a new commercial dishwasher that will help keep down disease and a new washer and dryer for linens — as well as outreach programs to school children and community groups.

But Vesco-Mock said some of the biggest improvements include changing employees' attitudes toward animals — prior to her hiring, shelter staff resorted routinely to euthanization — and implementing standard policies, something that didn't exist before.

"Every day, my challenge is, how are we going to kill the least amount of animals as possible?" she said.

The numbers

When Vesco-Mock started the job, she said the euthanization rate was over 70 percent. But over the two years she's been there, it has been about 64 percent, representing about 19,049 animals killed.

Despite reductions, the shelter's euthanasia rate is high comparatively. A national average in July 2008 indicated that 13.8 pets were killed per 1,000 residents, according to a report. In Doña Ana County, however, 46.7 animals are killed per 1,000 residents.

On the job

Some members of the animal welfare community have criticized Vesco-Mock over policies — such as packing the shelter with animals to keep from euthanizing them — and her performance, contending she's not doing enough to reduce euthanasias. In a few cases, personality clashes seem to be at the heart of conflicts.

Maryln Zahler, vice president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico, is among those who believe Vesco-Mock is taking the wrong approach by housing so many dogs and cats.

"She wants to make the place — and I admire her for that — a no-kill facility, but unfortunately we're not there yet," Zahler said. "Nobody wants to put animals down, but the facility wasn't built for all these animals."

In addition, Zahler said the shelter building isn't up to par, but noted Vesco-Mock isn't to blame. Rather, she said, it's a responsibility that lies with the city and county officials who oversee the facility. Eventually, she said, "the city and county have to bite the bullet and find the funds for a new building."

But Vesco-Mock also has garnered support.

Sherry Gara, president of the all-volunteer Spay Neuter Action Program in Las Cruces, was among Vesco-Mock's detractors in the beginning. But Gara said she soon changed her mind.

Gara said she's been involved with the shelter intermittently as a volunteer for a decade and has seen 10 directors in that time. Vesco-Mock, she said, is the "best by far" and is a "hands-on director."

"She's outstanding," Gara said. "The shelter is cleaner. More animals are being saved. The euthanasias are going down. The service is better."

Gara said she's especially impressed that Vesco-Mock doesn't automatically euthanize sick dogs and cats, simply because they're ill, but looks for ways to treat them.

With the exception of one past interim director, Gara said, "none of the other directors would ever treat the sick animals; if their nose ran and they were sick, they were dead."

Gara noted that some problems the shelter experienced before Vesco-Mock have disappeared. For example, she said, instances of small puppies and little animals falling into open drains were once common, because "they weren't keeping the drain covers on." But that doesn't happen any more, she said.

The shelter is run by a board of Las Cruces city councilors and Doña Ana County commissioners, who took over direct oversight in January 2008 after previously contracting out management to a nonprofit group. Prior to that, the shelter often was in a state of turmoil, with high turnover among directors and allegations about mismanagement.

Asked his opinion about Vesco-Mock's performance, board member Miguel Silva, also a city councilor, didn't say much. He noted he's looking forward to an upcoming report from an advisory panel, saying it's "going to give us some good guidance as to where we're headed."

"I know it has been challenging for her, but it has been for the center as well — trying to put this under one umbrella," he said.

Hurdles remain

Vesco-Mock, at the time she was hired, committed to a goal of achieving a no-kill rate for adoptable animals — excluding certain sick or aggressive pets — within five to seven years.

Asked whether she still feels the goal is achievable, she said she believes it is for dogs, but not for cats — unless city and county officials approve new ordinances allowing managed feral cat colonies to be established. She said that's because the community, for whatever reason, seems more willing to adopt dogs than cats.

A controversial feral cat ordinance has been proposed for the county, though city officials haven't made the same move.

Gara said she believes that announcing a goal of becoming a no-kill center was a mistake.

Silva, too, said it was the wrong move. He said he's spoken to officials with animal shelters at Albuquerque and Santa Fe, who've said space is always a limiting factor in public-run shelters.

"Those facilities that are no-kill centers, once they reach full capacity, they can say: "No' we're not taking any more.' We're a public facility so we have to take in a lot more animals."

Regardless of whether it can reach a no-kill goal, most people agree that reducing euthanasias will require an increase in spaying and neutering of animals, thereby shrinking intake at the shelter.

Gara, whose organization helps low-income residents get their pets spayed or neutered, said too many residents don't treat animals as if they're valuable.

"They use them as doorbells on chains, and when they get sick and die, they get another one," she said.

Vesco-Mock said one goal is to increase outreach to the Spanish-speaking community, with literature about pet ownership.

"We're leaving that population behind, and I feel we're doing them a disservice," she said.

Budget woes

As the shelter goes into the 2010-11 fiscal year starting July 1, it's likely to face a \$150,000 cut to its operating budget.

Vesco-Mock said she'll likely be able to replace that using savings from this year. But it will mean that money won't be available for other building improvements, like she'd planned.

In spite of the stresses, Vesco-Mock said her love for animals keeps her going.

"They didn't ask to be born, and we are their caretakers," she said. "No one is going to step up and fight for these animals."

Diana M. Alba can be reached at dalba@lcsun-news.com; (575) 541-5443

If you go

What: board meeting of the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley

When: 9 a.m. Thursday

Where: Doña Ana County Government Center, 845 N. Motel Blvd.

Info: (575) 647-7200 or www.ascmv.org

Shelter numbers during Beth Vesco-Mock's tenure*

Animals taken in: 29,899

Adopted out: 4,671

Reunited with owners: 3,417

Sent to rescue organizations: 1,104

Euthanized: 19,049

*May 1, 2008 to March 31, 2010

Source: Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley