

Shelter head has to make tough choices as puppies inundate facility

By Ashley Meeks Sun-News reporter

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LAS CRUCES -- The clock blared 4:32 a.m. when the 174 puppies jolted Beth Vesco-Mock from sleep Saturday.

There are 41 puppies sleeping outside. More than 30 litters are inside. The shelter's financial analyst and office assistant both have litters in their offices.

Since October, said Vesco-Mock, the director of the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley, the shelter has been overflowing with adoptable puppies.

"It's horrendous," she said Saturday, while checking on an adoption event at Petco in Las Cruces. "I woke up this morning worrying about the puppies."

It's horrendous because Vesco-Mock is, in her words, the county's only official with the power of an executioner. By Monday, she will have to decide which 50 puppies -- most too young to even be away from their mothers -- should be euthanized.

"It's a horrible power to have," she said. "It weighs on me every day."

Next week, there will be more litters, and it won't be long before the siblings of the euthanized will be delivered.

"I will be having these puppies again in six months," she said. "Obviously, what is going on in this community for the last 20 years is not working: 285,000 animals brought into that shelter -- that's more than the population in Do-a Ana County -- and we've killed over 211,000."

That's a higher euthanasia-per-capita rate than any other state but West Virginia and Mississippi, Vesco-Mock said. In 2009 alone, more than 15,000 animals were brought in. The first two weeks of this year point to even more "unreal" numbers -- "oodles and oodles" of terriers, red Australian Shepherds, pit bulls and Catahoulas.

"We're killing for space, strictly for space," Vesco-Mock said. "Someone dropped off a full-grown German shepherd last week and dropped off its ball with it. It breaks my heart. Every time I walk by, he picks the ball up because he wants to play. We have got to teach responsibility."

It costs the county \$80 to kill an animal and just \$25 to spay or neuter it on adoption, said Sherry Gara, president of the Spay and Neuter Action Program, which charges \$25 to alter a cat or dog to low-income pet-owners, a population that's grown during the current recession. With the limited space at the shelter, Gara is pushing for a cheaper policy of "trap, neuter and release" for feral cats.

"People (keep intact animals) because they think they're going to get money," Gara said. "There were people this week who'd pulled over to the side of the road with a truck of puppies, trying to sell them for \$100 apiece. They were all sick, they all had worms and Parvo. It was horrible."

A breeding pair of dogs and cats, assuming two animals survive from every litter, can produce more than 1.1 million animals in their lifetime, she said.

"This sounds crude, but animals don't have fun having sex," Gara said. "It's not like humans. And they need to be spayed and neutered and that's all there is to it. Other communities are vigilant about doing it and they don't have to kill -- we kill at least 40 a day, seven days a week, and that's crazy."

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To adopt

- Adopting a puppy costs \$75, which includes the first set of vaccinations, spay/neuter and microchip.
- To adopt a new puppy for your home, visit the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley at 3551 Bataan Memorial West, call 382-0018, or visit the Web site at www.ascmv.com.

Fixing the problem

Spay & Neuter Action Program: (575) 524-9265 or at 365 Avenida de Mesilla in the Better Life Pet Food Store