

Stray ward renovations begin at local animal shelter

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LAS CRUCES - The roar of a jackhammer filled a wing formerly occupied by barking dogs - the animals found wandering the streets of Las Cruces or various corners of Doña Ana County.

A handful of men, outfitted in safety goggles, were tackling their task: stripping a layer of outdated flooring from the room.

They began work early Monday on the project, a renovation of Stray Kennel Ward A - one of five such rooms in the city-county Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley.

The improved flooring will help keep dogs from getting sick, said Beth Vesco-Mock, executive director of the shelter.

"It will be a room that's totally able to be sanitized every day - no porous floor or walls, so disease will not be able to harbor here," she said.

Once the flooring is stripped off, the concrete must be further ground to prep it for the new sealant and epoxy layers that will be applied, said Ramon Najera, owner of Monopoly flooring, a subcontractor carrying out the work. He said it should take about two weeks to complete.

In August 2010, a three-person panel of experts from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals criticized the shelter for its unsealed concrete flooring, which promotes the spread of disease. It recommended a two-month shelter closure to undertake renovations. The shelter's governing board didn't carry out the recommendation.

In all, 18 kennels - concrete walls topped by wire fencing - are in the ward that's being renovated. The 7-foot by 4-foot kennels altogether hold an average of 46 dogs, said Paul Richardson, kennel supervisor for the shelter. One or two large dogs can fit in a cage or as many as "five tiny chihuahuas," he said.

In addition to new flooring, Vesco-Mock said paneling, left over from a previous project, also will be installed on the walls to make them easier to clean. The contractor officially has until Feb. 28 to finish. However, Vesco-Mock said she's hoping the job is done sooner, because the more time that passes, the greater the likelihood she'll have to euthanize more animals because the space isn't available to house them.

"The longer the project takes, the more animals are at risk," she said.

To empty the kennels in advance of construction, Vesco-Mock said the shelter heavily promoted its adoption and rescue efforts throughout January. And Safe Haven Animal Sanctuary, a private no-kill shelter, is keeping some of the dogs for a while.

The cost of the work is about \$34,800, according to shelter officials. Vesco-Mock said money for the project will come from leftover dollars saved from previous years' budgets.

Jess Williams, Doña Ana County spokesman and a member of the shelter's governing board, said ideally, the entire building would be renovated. But with limited resources, "I think the phased approach makes the most sense," he said.

The current, porous flooring in Stray Kennel Ward A was likely the original material installed when the shelter was built in the mid-'80s, Vesco-Mock said.

"It probably was state of the art at the time," she said.

Vesco-Mock said flooring throughout other parts of the building, including the cat adoption room and the medical rooms, also needs replacing.

The next part of the building slated for repair is the HVAC system, Vesco-Mock said. The current system also has been criticized for promoting the spread of disease.

City officials are handling design work for the new HVAC system, a step that should be finished in early March, Vesco-Mock said.

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