

## Animal shelter needs paradigm/philosophy shift

By Michel Meunier For the Sun-News

Article Launched: 02/07/2008 12:00:00 AM MST

I was at the City Council meeting Jan. 22 to hear the announcement concerning the city and county taking over our animal shelter operations. I was there as a board member of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico, a former shelter volunteer who got kicked out for being too vocal in my criticisms, concerns, and trying to implement life-saving ideas, but, mostly, I was at this meeting as a sincerely concerned citizen and longtime animal lover and activist.

Many in the public got up to speak, with most in support of the change. One speaker was a shelter employee, visibly shaken, saying that she wanted our leaders to know they are not monsters. She spoke of euthanasia techs who cry themselves to sleep at night for this job that does the dirty work for the public's irresponsible pet owners who don't fix their animals or who do not claim them when lost. I can truly respect and feel compassion for these employees on one hand, and there was a time I truly believed this to be 100 percent true. But, since then, I've started reading and researching everything I could about sheltering in the U.S.

There is another side to this coin that says that simply blaming the public for the mass killing is short-sighted, too. It is this short-sightedness that never allowed former shelter management and staff to turn things around for the better. It is very easy to blame the public and go on with the killing, feeling awful along the way, and becoming defeatist and apathetic in what you do and hypersensitive in the

face of criticism, which leads to hatred of that public you are supposed to be serving. How can you progress within this mindset?

This closes most shelter operators in this country to both legitimate criticisms and to ideas that would help curb the killing. I have no doubt, as this shelter employee said, that staff there care about animals and try their best. And, I'm also sorry to say, that just isn't good enough for this community. For every "bad" pet owner out there, there are many more that collectively spend billions of dollars a year on our pets, and we are part of the public that deserve better service from our shelter and expect better care for the animals there.

As a nation, there are enough homes for these 6 million homeless animals that are put down each year. Surely, with our modern age, there are better ways to network to save lives within our community and outside of it, too. For a nation that shares our homes with millions of dogs and cats, with people that talk to them like family members and celebrate their birthdays each year, surely we can find visionary ways to do better by our homeless pets.

What our city and county leaders must do now is some research on the fact that this is not the only way shelters can be run. I heard many say they want Las Cruces to be progressive in all its endeavors at yesterday's meeting, and I felt some hope in hearing it. Luckily, there are progressive sheltering systems and models operating in our country today that do not kill 70 percent of the animals that come through their doors. There are some out there with save rates of 70, 80, and even 90 percent for all healthy, treatable animals. Most animals that come into shelters fall into this category.

This is the case even for open-admission shelters such as ours. For a recent example with intake numbers close to the Las Cruces shelter, visit the

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Nevada Humane Society's Web site. That's one example of many. There are national experts and shelter directors with great track records who might be willing to talk to our leaders or provide consultation services as well as help us find a good shelter director of our own.

What our shelter needs is strong, compassionate leadership that fully embraces a radical paradigm and philosophy shift in animal sheltering that seeks to save as many lives as possible and provide excellent animal care and public services to our community — to work WITH the community instead of placing all the blame there. This would benefit both the shelter employees (less crying all night and more pride in their work) and the homeless animals that end up there (less disease and death).

These progressive programs include working with large numbers of volunteers, partnering with rescue groups and other no-kill shelters locally and nationally, medical and behavior rehabilitation efforts, building foster care networks, a non-lethal feral cat sterilization program, high-volume and low-cost spay/neuter services, public relations and marketing pets more, pet retention efforts (helping the public deal with issues so they keep their animals), and more than anything else, a hard-working, compassionate director who is not content to hide behind the myth of "too many animals and not enough homes" or regurgitate tired clichés about public irresponsibility.

Sure, some people in the public are irresponsible pet owners, but you aren't going to change that by rubbing their face in your euthanasia numbers, hitting them with a rolled up newspaper, and then telling them to behave next time. And, there are alternatives to what can be done with these homeless animals. Each animal that enters those shelter doors deserves a chance at a new life and home, not the end of the line that most find.

It's no great secret that animal sheltering is a morally ambiguous business and one that is hard on the hearts and minds of those who undertake to do it. This doesn't mean we should give up the fight to do better. I have seen and met many a pet-loving person in this community that would gladly give up their personal time to come help out at the shelter if it was more receptive, open, and transparent to the public it serves.

Michel Meunier is a Las Cruces resident.

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