

On the Positive Side: Thinking outside the box can help solve our problems

By Frank Bryce

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In a recent column, "On the Positive Side" examined "Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters" set forth by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians, a rich resource that offers solutions to some of our animal welfare problems in Las Cruces. The guidelines were intended to be adapted by local communities. It is always inspiring to me to be reminded that resources exist outside our community, and they are generously lent to help our own thinking.

Another gem is found in the January/February 2011 issue of the Humane Society of the United States Animal Sheltering journal. A lead article describes the approach of the city of Calgary Animal Services Center to the problems of animal overpopulation and overcrowding at the animal shelter.

Director Bill Bruce is quoted in the article, "Our problem is responsible pet ownership. Every animal in a shelter or on the street is probably there because a human relationship failed. ... So then I thought, 'we need to find more ways to support the relationships.'"

Wow, does that sound familiar? One goal of animal services is to reunite pets and their humans. Bruce initiated an innovative licensing program to do just that. His approach emphasized valuing companion animals, and licensing as a symbol of that caring. "We wanted to shift it and actually create a license system where you would want to license your pet because it brings value, not because it's the law." Their mantra became "My license is my ticket home."

Calgary Animal Services implemented a program that allowed identification and return to owner by animal control before even taking animals to the shelter. The success of this program is nothing short of remarkable.

In 2009, Calgary returned 86 percent of 4,200 impounded dogs to owners. An amazing 30 percent of these were driven straight home and did not come to a shelter. Over this same period Calgary's euthanasia rate was only 5 percent. The implications for cost saving are impressive, too.

As this article goes to press, officials with the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico are researching similar resources and possible programs to propose to our community leaders. We have already talked with Calgary's director to gain insight about Calgary's program. The elements of their successful approach involve rapid identification and processing prior to shelter arrival and return-to-owner policies and procedures to encourage responsible pet ownership and retention. It is immensely hopeful to realize that innovation is happening everywhere and we can import it into southern New Mexico.

Patricia Cameron, executive director of the Calgary Humane Society, states "It's all part of a collaborative spirit that is greater in Calgary than any other community I am aware of."

We should be saying that about our community, too.

Frank Bryce is president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico.