

Animal Services – Creating a Win-Win
Reducing Costs While Improving Customer Service and Public Support
Mitch Schneider, Animal Services Manager

Introduction

Washoe County Regional Animal Services (WCRAS), also serving the cities of Reno and Sparks in northern Nevada, has gained national attention for having one of the highest pet returned-to-owner rates and lowest pet euthanasia rates in the country. This is the result of a successful public-private partnership with Nevada Humane Society, collaborative relationships with many other area animal rescue groups, extensive use of technology, broad public support, and pet-friendly policies and practices. The following is a brief synopsis of the approach that has proved to be so successful in our community.



Background

The first step in Washoe County’s transformation was voters passing a referendum in 2002 that funded the construction of a new facility and animal services operations. As part of that referendum, Washoe County also consolidated the cities of Reno’s and Sparks’ animal services departments into a county operated regional program and, at the same time, entered into a formal partnership with Nevada Humane Society (NHS). This public-private partnership allowed both agencies to share the new facility which opened in 2006.

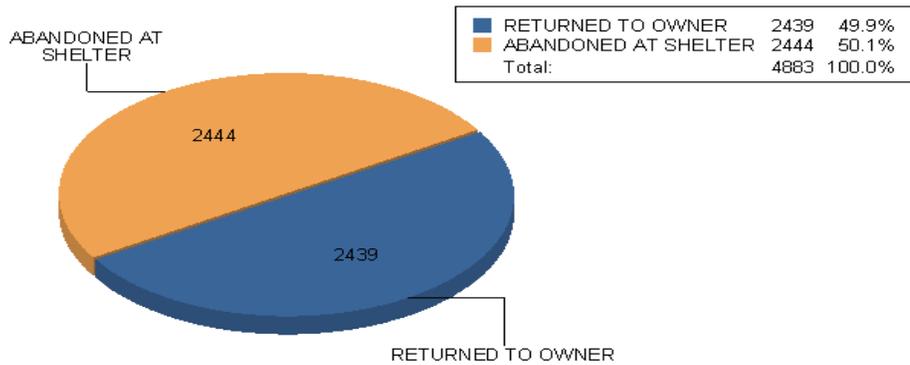
WCRAS focuses on the public health and safety concerns while also protecting the wellbeing of animals. NHS accepts owner-surrendered pets in addition to saving as many of the animals abandoned at WCRAS as possible, working tirelessly to re-home them. NHS also provides a free Animal Help Desk to assist pet owners in addressing many of the common pet behavior problems and other concerns that frequently result in an owner abandoning a pet.



Understanding the Priority – Reducing Pet Abandonment

Abandonment of animals is a major source of cost to a community’s animal services program. Washoe County impounds nearly 5,000 dogs and almost as many cats each year. Of the 5,000 dogs impounded, approximately 50% are abandoned by their owners, which is common in many communities. This could result in a significant amount of funding being spent on the euthanasia of the abandoned animals if not for working closely with the animal rescue groups. When an animal services program recognizes the economic and social costs of animal abandonment, *tackling this problem becomes a priority.*

OUTCOMES FOR IMPOUNDED DOGS



Compounding the problem, many traditional animal services programs follow an approach that parallels parking enforcement. In some parking enforcement situations, a vehicle is towed and impounded and held until the costs of the towing and impound fees are collected. This practice makes sense when you have a vehicle that is worth a substantial sum of money. But it doesn’t work quite as well when you’re talking about an animal that, more often than not, has little or no monetary value. This approach to recovering costs of animal services often increases the need for more shelter space and increases the abandonment and euthanasia rates, which in turn increases the cost of the program. Additionally, this approach fails to recognize that most people consider pets to be a family member and therefore, the traditional business model does little to garner public support.



Focusing on the Priority – Collaboration

Many animal services programs and animal rescue groups focus on the difference in their primary missions; animal services’ focus is public safety and animal rescue groups’ focus is saving animals. By doing so, they often fail to recognize the commonality in their missions and resist working with each other, either intentionally or due to conflicting policies and practices. As a result, some animal services programs may be overlooking a significant opportunity to reduce costs and increase community support.

WCRAS is embracing the efforts of animal rescue groups and has found that working closely with these groups has dramatically reduced the need for euthanasia. In 2008, NHS transferred 3,762 dogs and cats from WCRAS to their shelter for adoption, with other local rescue groups saving

another 1,461 for a total of 5,223 dogs and cats. Additionally, NHS accepted over 4,100 owner surrendered dogs and cats, which most likely would have ended up at WCRAS if not for this collaborative partnership. In 2009, no dogs or cats, classified as healthy and behaviorally sound, were euthanized in Washoe County. This resulted in significant cost savings for the animal services program, increased public support and reduced stress for the staff members that perform euthanasia duties; which in turn, increased employee morale and quite likely reduced employee turnover.

In Washoe County, NHS and a number of other local animal rescue groups are working together to create a *no-kill* community by reducing the need for euthanasia of healthy, adoptable animals. This initiative, also seen in many other communities, is receiving strong public support. It is important for WCRAS to continue to work closely with these groups to ensure policies, practices and laws work in harmony with their efforts so the community reaps all of the benefits of this endeavor. Communities and organizations that want to work together toward reducing euthanasia may also qualify for grants from Maddie's Fund (to find out more about this program visit their web site at www.maddiesfund.org).



Another program that also involves collaboration with an animal rescue group focuses on feral cats. WCRAS works closely with Community Cats, a Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program run by Diana Lucree, DVM. This program offers an effective approach to dealing with feral cat problems within the community—something most communities struggle with, at least in the more temperate climates. WCRAS has found that approximately 90% of people reporting a concern with feral cats would rather handle this problem through a non-lethal program. This approach is gaining strong public support and many animal services programs around the country are now turning to TNR. In addition to reducing euthanasia, it also greatly reduces shelter expenses for housing these cats.

Focusing on the Priority – Policies and Practices

To reduce the likelihood of needing a larger shelter facility in the future at a cost in the millions of dollars, WCRAS policy directs Animal Control Officers to make every reasonable effort to return animals to their owner instead of impounding the animal. In addition to checking the pet for identification (tags or microchips), officers will check lost reports and speak with area residents in an attempt to determine if anyone knows where the animal lives. In addition to reducing shelter costs, this policy also reduces animal abandonment and enhances public support. A dog license is promoted as “Your Dog’s Ticket Home;” providing a true benefit for licensing increases voluntary compliance, further reducing impounds and the inherent potential for abandonment. Every year, officers return over 1,000 dogs directly to their owners, without impounding them—reducing shelter space requirements, shelter staff and supply needs and stress to the dogs and their owners. Upon returning the animal to the owner, all laws are enforced and warnings, civil penalties or misdemeanor citations are issued as deemed appropriate. Note, to address the increasing costs associated with enforcement of the animal laws, Washoe County adopted a civil penalty process. This removed the less serious animal-related violations from the court system and will result in a much more cost effective way of dealing with these types of infractions.

Another traditional practice in animal services that increases abandonment is the policy of not allowing an owner to redeem their pet if they can't pay **all** of the fees at the time of redemption. Continuing to hold the animal until all of the fees are collected simply increases the redemption fees for the pet owner and increases the need for greater sheltering space, reduces public support and increases abandonment. To address this issue, Washoe County has established a billing system which is only used with supervisor permission to ensure that this option is offered as a last resort; unpaid bills are turned over to collections.

Customer service is important in any business and animal service should not be the exception. In an effort to provide the finest in customer service, our hours of operation are designed to provide the citizens we serve with maximum access to redeem their pets; our citizens are able to redeem their pets 7 days a week, including holidays. Since shelter staff must be at work 7 days-a-week, it was reasonable to cross-train them to handle pet redemptions too. This reduces holding times and abandonment of pets, and therefore operational costs; it also reduces boarding fees for the pet owner, resulting in another win-win opportunity.

Disclosure of statistics is an area that requires some mention. It's not uncommon for agencies to be reluctant to publish their statistics. However, WCRAS feels that by publishing detailed statistical information citizens can see the problems that need to be addressed within the community; this type of transparency can also help in gaining the trust and support of the community's animal rescue groups. An excellent reporting format that is widely used came out of the Asilomar Accords; more information on this reporting format and the Asilomar Accords can be found on their web site at www.asilomaraccords.org. Lastly, Maddie's Fund may even provide grant money to communities willing to publish their statistics; WCRAS has received \$40,000 in the past simply for publishing its' statistics. More information on Maddie's Fund can be found at www.maddiesfund.org.

For safety and liability reasons, it can be challenging to make effective use of volunteers in animal services work. However, they can be invaluable as a *pet detective* where they can have a positive effect on reducing abandonment and enhance customer service. WCRAS is developing a Volunteer Pet Detective program to assist pet owners in looking for their lost pets to comb lost pet ads and reports to look for possible matches with pets in the shelter. The program will provide a valuable service to those that have lost their pet and it also reduces the need to have paid staff dealing with this somewhat time-consuming area of public assistance. A program of this type can also play an important role in reducing the likelihood of receiving negative media attention and reducing the potential for civil liability stemming from the accidental euthanasia of someone's lost pet.

Focusing on the Priority – Technology



To increase dog licensing, Washoe County dog owners have the convenience of licensing their pets online through the county's web site at www.washoecounty.us/animal. The online licensing also provides the person with the option of donating money to Animal Services, resulting in over \$10,000 in donations each year. Additionally, photos and descriptions of all the animals impounded at the shelter are posted to the county's web site so that pet owners looking for a lost pet can do so from any computer with internet access. Officers are able to take a photo of a lost pet in the field and

immediately upload it so that pet owners are seeing photos in real-time. Pet owners without a computer can ask a friend, neighbor or relative to look for their pet online or they can use a public library computer. Without the associated time and expense of driving to the shelter every day, pet owners will generally continue to look for their pets for longer periods of time, thereby, further increasing redemptions. Citizens can also file lost or found animal reports online. Making it more convenient, less costly and less stressful for pet owners to find lost pets or to license their pets can reduce animal abandonment; it also reduces the staff time/costs spent assisting citizens. Increasing pet redemptions can also significantly reduce the pressure on animal rescue partners who have the task of re-homing abandoned animals.

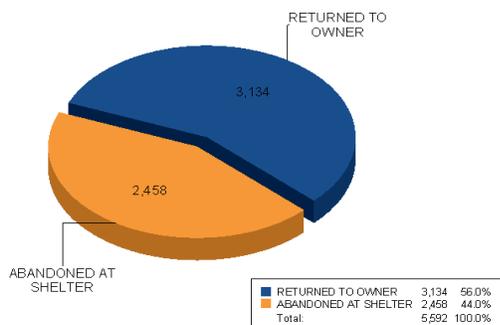
Imagine what the world of law enforcement would be like if vehicles didn't have VIN numbers and license plates; that's been the animal services world, until now. The *microchip* has been around for roughly 20 years, yet the benefits of this device are still not fully appreciated by many pet owners. This is tragic because microchips will likely prove to be the single most important technology and step towards reducing the abandonment of animals, not to mention the value they provide in helping pet owners recover lost or stolen animals. As such, it is important for animal services programs to do as much as possible to promote this product and encourage pet owners to avail themselves to the benefits of this technology. A microchip is particularly valuable to cat owners who tend to be reluctant to put a collar on their pet. It should also be promoted as an important element of any pet owner's personal disaster preparedness plan. WCRAS obtained modifications to state regulations so that licensed Euthanasia Technicians can implant microchips without a veterinarian present. This dramatically reduces the cost since the majority of the cost is due to labor costs (microchips can be purchased by shelters for as little as \$5). Note, the State of Illinois now requires that all animals impounded be microchipped upon redemption or adoption. Many other communities are following suit and/or are permitting a microchip to be used in lieu of a license tag.



Conclusion

The graph below would indicate that Washoe County is moving in the right direction as owner redemptions of dogs at the shelter are up 6% from the previous year. When you factor in that approximately 1,000 dogs were taken directly home, the total abandonment rate is less than 40%. And, if you further consider that **all** of the abandoned dogs and cats which were healthy and behaviorally sound were rescued, you can readily see that by a willingness to move away from traditional practices, utilizing technology to its fullest and collaborating extensively with community animal rescue groups, an animal services program can reduce costs, increase public support and create a true Win-Win program for their community.

2009 OUTCOMES FOR ALL IMPOUNDED DOGS



OVERVIEW

- Collaboration with community animal rescue groups will reduce euthanasia and program costs.
- Establishing niche volunteer opportunities, such as Pet Detectives, can reduce costs and improve customer service.
- Impounding pets, unless absolutely necessary, is not in anyone's best interest as it:
 - Increases the need for a larger facility to house more pets.
 - Increases stress for the owner and animal alike.
 - Increases staff needed for care of the animals.
 - Increases abandonment and the associated euthanasia and disposal costs.
 - Reduces public support.
- Returning animals to owners in the field and issuing the appropriate warning or citation is a more cost effective approach and increases public support. Consider using civil penalties in lieu of criminal penalties for additional savings.
- Expanding shelter hours for redemption of pets can increase redemptions and lower both euthanasia and costs.
- Increasing pet registration is necessary to reduce the need for impounding of pets. (Pet identification through licensing and microchipping initiatives can have a very positive effect on a program's cost and should be an important part of an animal services business plan; the City of Calgary funds their entire program through licensing fees for dogs and cats.)
- Promoting Trap-Neuter-Return for feral cats reduces costs and increases public support.
- Encouraging spaying and neutering through differential licensing fees helps decrease the homeless pet problem.
- Providing problem pet behavior assistance through a help line and other educational material is helpful in reducing the abandonment of pets. (Pet behavior problems cause people to *fall out of love* with their pet and are the major reasons for abandonment at shelters; common reasons for abandonment are barking, house-training, chewing, digging and repeatedly running away.)