

Program amazingly boosts number of pets saved at KCK animal shelter

By DAWN BORMANN,
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Intense barking and howling from mutts pierce the air at the animal control facility in Kansas City, Kan.

Even among the desperate bunch, an unnamed red retriever stands out for his age and hobbled gait.

A year ago the statistics for these jailed pets were grim. Their voices, more often than not, were silenced by euthanasia.

But timing is everything.

Since Jan. 1, the "Ray of Hope" program has taken the inner-city facility's euthanasia rate down to less than 4 percent. During the same period last year, the facility euthanized 54 percent of the animals.

"These are highly adoptable animals. They just need a chance. They need more than three or four days," Humane Society spokeswoman Robin Rowland said of the required holding period. "I think (Ray of Hope) is something that can be duplicated anywhere across the nation. But it does take groups of people, city employees, volunteers and not-for-profits."

The change has happened through a multiprong approach that includes more adoptions, stepped-up spay and neuter efforts and the help of several nonprofits. Other shelters have similar efforts, but the Kansas City, Kan., facility has uniquely linked all the efforts to make incredible progress in a short time.

The key is a huge network of people, including volunteers, who work to find temporary shelters or more permanent sanctuaries and adoptive families for the animals, according to several national experts who praised the program.

"You have to bring more resources than almost any community has got in public money," said Gregory Castle, a founder of the Utah-based nonprofit Best Friends. It is the largest domestic shelter in the country and is working to rehabilitate some of football player Michael Vick's pit bulls.

For years the Kansas City, Kan., animal control facility, like many, felt it had little choice but to euthanize animals to make room for the next batch of stray dogs and cats.

Before animals can be euthanized, state law requires pounds to hold on to them for three full business days after the day they come in. Weekends don't count. If a pound chooses, it can euthanize the animal on the fourth day.

Last year, 4,281 animals moved through the Kansas City, Kan., facility.

"Our first obligation is public safety," said Kansas City, Kan., Police Capt. Rodney Smith, who is the animal control director. "I have to keep bringing in animals that are causing problems in the community. I have to keep this place moving. It's just finding options where we can have positive outcomes for the animal."

So Smith turned to the community for help. And the community responded.

The Ray of Hope effort involves the Kansas City, Kan., Police Department; the Humane Society; volunteers; local shelters that won't euthanize the animals; and breed rescue groups throughout the country. The nonprofit groups work together to systematically place every pet at the animal control facility. Together, the agencies have been able to place all but a few aggressive and severely sick animals.

The concept is simple. The additional work is staggering.

The process starts every Monday afternoon when Smith, Humane Society director Karen Sands and Humane Society veterinarian Michelle Taylor meet to analyze the latest batch of strays. They walk through the facility and take notes on every animal.

Their findings determine each animal's new home. Some pets will stay at the animal control facility and go up for adoption. Some will go to the Humane Society, and Sands hopes to find room for the others at local groups such as Pet Connection, Mastiff Hope, Safe Harbor, Kitty City and Barn Paws.

Time is of the essence because Smith, an animal lover, must keep cages open for new strays. There is only so much room at the animal control center.

This week alone, Sands had 34 cats and dogs to place. Only one aggressive dog qualified for euthanasia.

She found homes for 33 animals in 24 hours. By Wednesday morning, only the red retriever remained on her list.

"I don't know if I can do anything with him," Sands said to no one in particular as she pondered the possibilities.

The retriever wouldn't have stood a chance a year ago. Even now it's difficult for shelters to spend the time a feeble dog like him needs. But Sands wasn't ready to throw in the towel.

That focus and determination has let the group save about 800 dogs since January.

Several other factors make Ray of Hope succeed.

** Wyandotte County's Unified Government passed an ordinance in recent years that requires pets to be spayed or neutered. Sands credits that change with a subsequent drop in the number of animals that animal control picks up.

** Several nonprofit animal groups offer low-cost spay and neuter clinics or give coupons that drastically cut the price.

** Feral cats, which are usually unsuitable for someone looking for a pet to adopt, now have a place to go. Ray of Hope has lined up farmers willing to let the cats roam their barns. Responsible caregivers will make sure they have what they need to survive.

** Every Saturday the animal control stages off-site adoptions with volunteers at PetSmart in Olathe and The Legends shopping center in Kansas City, Kan. The clinics allow animal control to market the pets at more convenient times.

"The problem is, since we're a government entity here, we're generally open during business hours, and that keeps a lot of people out," Smith said.

The Legends site has proved popular with out-of-towners. Last week a Wichita couple staying at the Chateau Avalon left with a local dog that they never would have seen if it had remained at the shelter.

Ray of Hope has improved morale at the animal control facility and inspired volunteers to go beyond the ordinary. Two faithful volunteers give the dogs baths every Friday before the adoption clinic.

Animal control pulls off the program without spending extra money, Smith said.

However, the program has affected local animal groups and the Humane Society, which has absorbed much of the cost.

Despite the extra work, the groups don't plan to stop anytime soon.

Dogs like the red retriever make it all worthwhile. On Wednesday, Sands found a sanctuary willing to take him.

And because the dog proved to be a survivor, the Humane Society employees immediately named him Rudy after Daniel "Rudy" Ruettiger, whose story of joining the Notre Dame football team against all odds was portrayed in the movie "Rudy."

"It's so satisfying when you see these dogs and cats get a home. That's why I keep doing it. I'm so driven by that," Sands said.

"We have to make this happen. The alternative is it's literally life and death."

How to help

To volunteer or donate to Ray of Hope, call 913-596-1000, ext. 22. The next volunteer class is 10 a.m. to noon June 13 at the Humane Society, 5445 Parallel Parkway, Kansas City, Kan.

To adopt, call the animal control facility at 913-321-1445 during regular business hours or go to the mobile adoption sites on Saturdays -- 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at The Legends fountain in Kansas City, Kan., and 11:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at PetSmart in Olathe.

@ Go to KansasCity.com for a photo gallery from the pound.

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