Dog Fight

Fur flies over kill rate at LA animal shelters

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The white hound dog with pale tan spots and a pink nose leaps joyfully against the fence in cage 27 of the East Valley Shelter. His excitement fills the narrow kennel, barking nonstop, ears flying, tail swinging. Each jump leaves a smear of pale brown paste on the mesh — it takes a minute to realize that with each jump he is stepping in his own shit, then daubing it on the fence with his paws. Odds are overwhelming that he won’t be leaping for long. Instead, he’ll be muzzled, strapped to a steel gurney and given a lethal injection, "euthanized" by a Los Angeles Department of Animal Regulation veterinary technician.

Then he’ll be one more casualty of the Los Angeles Department of Animal Services’ outsized kill rate, one of the nearly 1,000 dogs and cats that are put to death each week while in the custody of city animal shelters — 72 percent of the dogs and cats brought in. So many animals are killed annually that the Bureau of Sanitation pays a Vernon rendering plant to take the bodies and turn them into fertilizer and, sometimes, a protein ingredient of animal feed.

And the kill-rate numbers are climbing, from 67.5 percent in 1995 to 72.1 percent last year. That last figure translates into 57,868 slain cats and dogs.

While L.A.’s kill rate is going up, other cities’ are dropping: San Diego’s has decreased by almost 10 percent, while over the last two years San Francisco’s hovers at an unheard-of 38 percent — that city’s rate dropped by one-third last year alone. The numbers in San Jose, San Mateo County and Portland, Oregon have all decreased.

Of course, Los Angeles presents a unique challenge to any effort at animal control. Sheer numbers set it apart. Last year, the city impounded 80,000 stray and abandoned dogs and cats in a system of 502 kennels divided among six shelters. San Diego, by comparison, impounded approximately 36,000 animals last year; Portland around 11,000 and San Francisco an estimated 12,000.

The city’s expanse is also daunting. Animal problems ranging from cat-eating coyotes in the Valley to packs of feral dogs in parts of South L.A. all fall within the domain of the Department of Animal Regulation, or Animal Services, as they prefer to be called. If ever a city needed a strategy for

animal control, it’s Los Angeles. Yet it’s hard to imagine a city further away from having one.

L.A.’s kill rate is just one symptom pointing to a Department of Animal Services in trouble. Its budget has been cut 16 percent over the past three years. And for the past seven months, the department has been run by an interim chief, Sharon Morris. Last week, the department named a new general manager, whose appointment must be confirmed by the City Council. The former general manager, Gary Olsen, resigned in September after a three-year term marked by constant pressure from animal humane societies and other pet advocates. The bitterness is evident from one critic’s assessment that "Gary Olsen treated animals like so much solid waste."

More problems were detailed in a lawsuit filed last year by four animal advocates who had repeated run-ins with the department. The suit alleged that Animal Services staff violated state laws against cruelty to animals, failed to hold animals for the 72 hours required by department policy before putting them down, failed even to keep records of what became of the animals in their charge. The case was dismissed "without prejudice" last December, meaning that plaintiffs can reorganize the evidence and submit it again.

Presiding over this bleak picture is the city’s Animal Regulation Commission, a five-member board appointed by the mayor to set policy and priorities for the city agency. The board was elevated from a purely advisory role by a 1993 city ballot measure.

The commission’s twice-monthly meetings serve as a forum for a regular coterie of animal-welfare advocates, among them vigilant, sometimes vociferous critics of the department. They include Encino resident Michael Bell, a successful actor, director of the advocacy group Citizens for a Humane Los Angeles and one of the petitioners in the suit against the department. Bell says he initially got involved in animal issues in an effort to stop the practice of coyote trapping. He spent years lobbying the commission for change in department practices, only to be ignored and then rebuffed.

Bell reels off a numbing array of statistics and anecdotes that damn the department: routine neglect and mistreatment of animals at the shelters; dogs and cats being killed as their owners waited to claim them. Bell speaks vehemently about the department and the commissioners’ attitude toward change: "They don’t care if they have a mouthful of rotten teeth — they’re the teeth they’re used to."

If the department’s critics have lost patience, so have the commissioners. Gini Barrett, a member of the commission and Western regional director of the American Humane Association, complains that animal advocates "pick on the department all day, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That’s all they do."

In testimony before a state Senate hearing last November on L.A.’s animal control problems, Barrett cited the agency’s problems filling two funded veterinarian positions. "The single biggest impediment to getting more veterinarians is the grassroots humane community," Barrett asserted. She compared trying to hire new vets to "trying to recruit doctors to work in an abortion clinic with pro-lifers protesting around it."

Commission president Steven Afriat voices the same sort of frustration. "The very people who

claim to care about animals waste my time with charges instead of working in partnership to get more resources for the department, as if we’re a bunch of sickos sitting around thinking about how we’ll euthanize animals."

As for the department’s kill rate, the commissioners make no apologies. "Until the public stops breeding animals recklessly, we will keep killing animals," Afriat says. "It is evil and we do it, and we do a lot of it."

Afriat’s brand of fatalism only incites local animal advocates. "They’re acting like the victims," retorts Madeline Bernstein, president of the L.A. chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "The victims are in the shelters."

The real problem with animal control in Los Angeles, commissioners say, is money. Afriat points out that the department’s $7.2 million budget is less than half that of the Animal Control Department of San Francisco, a city one-sixth the size of L.A. "We’re cut to the bone and then some," adds Mimi Robbins, now in her third term on the commission. "We’re at the bleeding point."

Still, while animal regulation may be underfunded in L.A., other municipalities have successfully dropped their kill rates in spite of budget restraints. In San Diego, in fact, some of the changes that led to improved perform ance were precipitated by budget problems. The kill rate there is still high — 57 percent of all animals impounded — but the rate has been dropping steadily, from 66 percent in 1992.

An audit and a new chief administrative officer forced the San Diego County Department of Animal Control to do a lot of things differently, says Director of Animal Control Hector Cazares. Aggressive adoption programs are part of it; a full-time customer-service representative at each shelter is charged with designing and implementing an adoption marketing campaign to target a variety of communities.

But the San Diego spay-and-neuter campaign to reduce animal overpopulation was even more essential, Cazares says. What makes it work? "Working very closely with a lot of animal groups," Cazares answers quickly. The department has a lead role in coordinating such programs as the Feline-Fix-a-Thon, a volunteer spay-neuter operation that alters cats for free, and low-cost spay-neuter programs run by volunteer vets and organizations. "One thing that really destroys effective animal management," Cazares says, "is turf wars."

San Diego is a success story, but San Francisco is a better place to be a dog or cat. It’s not perfect — a 38 percent kill rate still means thousands of animals put down — but that represents a 20 percent drop in five years. A spay-and-neuter program is less the key there than a sophisticated system for fostering animals. And once again that involves a creative public-private partnership.

San Francisco Animal Care and Control works closely with that city’s SPCA, a powerhouse nonprofit agency that boasts a $10 million annual budget, a $7 million shelter and 2,345 volunteers who contribute 90,000 hours annually. The SFSPCA has had 130 years to build its vast resources, but it also has Richard Avanzino, an energetic and charismatic CEO.

Avanzino devised an adoption pact between the SPCA and the City and County of San Francisco Animal Care and Control Department. The SPCA shelter takes animals from the city shelters and houses them long-term while the agency works on placing them and volunteers rehabilitate animals with health or behavioral problems. An aggressive adoption campaign receives corporate underwriting and includes mobile adoptions at up to 28 locations a week. The S.F. Department of Animal Care and Control concurs that the arrangement has contributed significantly to the dip in the kill rate.

City officials in Portland dropped that city’s kill rate roughly 20 percent through a similar structure. Multnomah County Animal Control enjoys a relationship with Portland’s Oregon Humane Society that mirrors the SPCA’s relationship with authorities in San Francisco. The Humane Society runs a long-term shelter and has taken charge of placing adoptable animals. When budget cuts forced the Multnomah Animal Control to close a mall adoption center two days a week, Humane Society volunteers took it over, allowing it to remain open seven days a week.

These community-government al liances don’t always operate seamlessly. Officials in San Francisco animal control grouse about the SPCA’s ability to pick and choose which animals they will accept into its long-term shelter. The relationship between the Multnomah County Animal Regulation and the Oregon Humane Society was frosty until a new Humane Society president made overtures to authorities there eight years ago. But,"The animals are more important than turf," says Karen Britain, a former humane-society employee. "Let’s get as many animals adopted as possible."

Efforts to forge similar alliances in Los Angeles, however, have foundered. The commissioners and a department spokesperson speak proudly of a volunteer force of 250-plus, but critics charge that the number is inflated. The SPCA’s Bernstein recounts amiable meetings with Commissioner Barrett in which Bernstein proposed that the LASPCA could take over investigating citizen complaints of cruelty by pet owners, a backup role that would allow the department to focus on getting strays off the street and upgrading its shelters. She says she never heard back. Instead, the L.A. chapter is collaborating with the city of Long Beach on a state-of-the-art shelter.

Barrett counters that it was the SPCA that refused to work with her. "The department used to rely on the quote unquote humane community," she adds testily, "and found out that [help] often didn’t materialize or came at too high a price."

Loud white noise from the junction of the Golden State and Pasadena freeways envelops the North Central Animal Care and Control Shelter, one of six in the city system and site of the first permanent low-cost spay-and-neuter clinic. Housed in a block-and-glass facility built as a wing off the shelter, the clinic stands in bright contrast to the dust-coated industrial area that surrounds it. Smiling plastic Easter bunnies wearing purple or blue or pink pants decorate the walls and glass.

There’s not much happening there on a glaring Thursday afternoon — one family waits at the counter to pick up a wriggling female shepherd mix. Most of the action takes place early in the morning, explains a young vet tech, when the animals are brought in. Since the clinic opened in December, up to 30 animals a day have been altered under the new program. Many of them are from the shel -ter itself and are getting fixed prior to adoption, but the facility is open to the public as well.

The clinic is run by the nonprofit Animal Foundation, Inc. It looks like an example of a healthy relationship between the agency and a nonprofit advocacy group — but there’s a catch. The Animal Foundation is not based in Los Angeles, but rather in Las Vegas. Many in the L.A. humane community would find that tartly symbolic. Unlike cities that have dropped their kill numbers, here in Los Angeles local community groups play only a minor role in the department’s seemingly haphazard spay-neuter plan.

While the new clinic provides needed service to northeast L.A., critics say, the rest of the city must make do with a fitful voucher program which distributes free spay-neuter coupons through the shelters, City Council offices and humane organizations. The department usually prints up 20,000 a year — $400,000 worth — but this year they were able to print just half that, says Linda Gordon, a 20-year department veteran and senior analyst at Administrative Services. Gordon explains that vouchers were cut because the department increased pre-release altering at the city shelters — that is, fixing dogs and cats before they are put up for adoption. That hasn’t lessened the demand for vouchers at the humane society and other adoption centers, however, and staff at those groups complain that there aren’t enough to go around.

It’s a critical shortfall given that public spay-neuter programs are fundamental to solving pet overpopulation and thus help reduce the kill rate. The department’s reason for the voucher shortage is its standard one — not enough money. There is nothing here like the thriving alliance between the veterinary community and the department that has made up for such budget gaps in San Diego.

Many in L.A.’s humane community reject the poverty plea as well. They say there should be plenty of funds available, because spay-neuter programs are funded by dog-license collections — $2 from every license, which costs $10 for an altered animal and $30 for unaltered. It’s hard to know how many dogs there are in households in L.A.; the department estimates a population of 735,000. In other areas, authorities use the calculation of one dog for every four persons, which would come out to around 900,000 in Los Angeles — over a million dollars in potential revenue.

Last year, the department collected over $360,000 for spay-neuter programs from licenses, 80 percent of that from renewals. One hundred fifty thousand of the licenses were collected through the department, which mails out notices to dog owners and through the collection counters in the shelters and downtown. Another 24,628 license fees were collected through a private agency called Civic Collections, which held the ’96 -’97 contract.

Civic Collections achieved a 25 percent increase in license collections over last year, when another company held the contract. But in a city of over half a million dogs, 24,000 doesn’t seem like a lot of new licenses.

"It’s not," Civic Collections president Douglas Shaw readily assents. "It should be three times that figure." Shaw, who started Civic Collections out of his Diamond Bar home five years ago, says that the problem is that it’s tough to recruit and retain staff. He has only recently gotten his staff as high as 25 license collectors — all paid strictly on commission — but says if he had 32, he could

cover the city. That may take a while longer; he estimates that he has interviewed between 300 and 400 people this year. "I have hired on officially 80 people, but they either resign because they find out that it’s not what they want to do, or I let them go."

A March 14 report to the commission shows that last year the department netted $251,142 from Civic Collections’ work, while the company, whose contract guarantees a 58-42 split, collected $346,815. L.A. animal-regulation officials say that it is the most advantageous department-contractor split yet and that it would be more expensive to do license collection in-house.

By contrast, in San Diego, where license collection is done in-house and through some 100 affiliated veterinarians, the department of Animal Control nets $2 million a year.

Not all those criticizing the L.A. department’s handling of spay-and-neuter funding are animal activists. Julie Butcher of Service Employees International Union Local 347, which represents city workers, has been pushing to bring license collection back in-house. "We made a proposal two years ago that would have made $1 million above costs," Butcher says. "We went to the commission and they said, ‘Yeah, yeah,’ so it went through council committees and they sent it to the department to develop a plan. And then it went away. Every time there’s some momentum to do it, the proposal suddenly disappears off the face of the earth." Even suggestions for a pilot program for in-house collection goes nowhere, says Butcher.

A union for city workers would, of course, have an obvious interest in seeing license collection moved out of the hands of a contractor, but Butcher says her approach only makes sense. "If the work’s already out the door and you have a couple of contractors that haven’t done a particularly good job, try something. Try anything."

Setting aside the Civic Collections contract, why can’t the department rely on the city’s veterinarians to promote spay-neuter — and to perform the operations at no cost — as do the animal-control agencies in San Diego, San Jose and San Mateo? That’s another failing for which L.A. commissioners place blame elsewhere. "I don’t perceive that we get a lot from the veterinary community here," says Afriat.

If their counterparts in other cities work so closely with community groups, why not L.A.? The problems here are the same, says Gini Barrett, but, "The difference is that they don’t have the same group of critics."

The last serious effort to bridge the gap between the Animal Regulation department and its critics was the short-lived tenure of Tarzana resident Russ Cook, who spent a year on the commision itself. Cook applied for the position after being encouraged by Michael Bell, and was appointed by Mayor Riordan in 1995. He was "fired" by the mayor’s office a year later after a noisy altercation with Barrett during which, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, she threw an empty water bottle at him. She missed.

The comic overtone of that incident is less relevant than the running battles between Cook and the other commissioners during his term — combat that Cook recalls with pride. It stemmed from philosophical differences, he says. The commission, Cook says, just wants to keep the streets clean, "and if they have to kill 50,000 animals, so be it."

In 1996, Cook tried to push through a plan to move Los Angeles toward San Francisco’s model. He presented a detailed proposal for a long-term facility that could house 34,000 animals. Cook’s funding proposals were sketchy, however — he was banking on a surplus city or county structure that might be available for a nominal lease fee. The plan was ridiculed by other commissioners and went nowhere.

Cook, a real estate professional, still feels his plan is feasible, but admits that he lacked the political know-how to push it through. And while animal advocates are able to regularly pack commission meetings, they appear to share Cook’s political ineptitude. Michael Bell concedes that the group as a whole has never settled on an ongoing agenda, a problem he attributes to the emotional toll of working with sick, injured and mistreated animals.

The commission, on the other hand, seems singularly qualified for political work. Steve Afriat made the *Los Angeles Times* list of the city’s 10 best-connected and best-paid lobbyists; Commissioner Al Avila is a City Hall veteran who was chief of staff for Councilman Richard Alatorre and campaign manager for Councilman Richard Alarcon; Gini Barrett is a former senior vice president of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers and is married to former Valley Assemblyman Richard Katz.

Despite the apparent concentration of connections, in each of the past three years the Animal Regulation budget submitted to the Mayor’s Office and the city’s chief accounting officer has been returned several million dollars leaner. Last year’s request for $11,337,000 was trimmed to $7,065,227 by the time the City Council passed the budget; this year’s proposal of nearly $10.9 million was cut to $7.2 million.

Bernstein wonders why the commission can’t bump the numbers up. "People don’t get appointed to the commission if they are complete strangers to City Hall. They have to have a network that gets their name on a short list. You’d think that would help in getting the budget together and getting things done."

"Lobbyists are not as powerful as people think they are," Barrett responds. "Council people don’t just look up and say, ‘Oh, there’s Steve Afriat — I have to give them everything they want.’"

The department has an ally in Councilwoman Laura Chick, chair of the Public Safety Committee, but city funds are tight as ever this year, and when stacked up against police or fire or other key departments, Animal Regulation simply can’t compete. Chick vows that the department budget will increase "if I have anything to do with it." But she’s making no promises. "I’m holding my breath as we enter the budget cycle."

But money won’t heal the rift between animal advocates and the city’s beleaguered department. One possible vehicle for conciliation, ironically, is the lawsuit against the department. The original writ was assembled by the plaintiffs with no legal help, but Lois Newman, one of the four original petitioners, has now obtained pro-bono support from David Casselman, a partner in a downtown firm that more frequently represents government agencies than it pressures them.

Casselman is talking the language of compromise. "We contacted the city for the purpose of trying to avoid a second lawsuit in the hopes that we can work together to remedy any problems that may exist," he says. And already, the City Attorney’s Office has agreed to consider a proposal that a veterinarian be retained to monitor Animal Regulation shelter practices and compliance with anti-cruelty statutes, and report to staff and community members. Casselman hopes for a reply by the end of the month.

The humane community is also hoping that the appointment of a new general manager will change the culture at the department, helping to forge new ties with the city’s myriad pet-aid agencies and humane groups.

Dan Knapp has a long history of work with statewide humane organizations, and is currently director of the California State Humane Association. In Sonoma county he holds the executive director’s post at the county humane society, where he won awards for innovative approaches to adoption and shelter management. In addition, Knapp excelled at fund-raising.

It may take all of Knapp’s abilities to cool the acrimony between community and commission in L.A. Even as the department changes leadership, Bernstein avers, "I hope Mayor Riordan takes my suggestions to change all or some of the commissioners."

Not likely. Despite the rising kill rates and the community’s lack of confidence, the Mayor’s Office responds to resignation suggestions with an avowal of "firm support of our commissioners."

Nor does the commission seem likely to break the stalemate. "You always get a few detractors," commissioner Afriat sniffs. "They’ll probably go after my mother next."