SEASON'S GREETINGS FROM SHELTER SENSE -- May your holidays be spent before warm hearths in the company of good friends. (photo by Bonnie Smith)

Cuddly puppies and kittens under the Christmas tree are great on greeting cards -- but bad in real life, for pets and people.

When people come to your shelter to adopt a new pet for a holiday gift, urge them to announce the gift with a card and pick up the animal after Christmas day is over. Or suggest they take the new pet home a few weeks before Christmas, and have the fun of opening pet toys on the holiday.

The bustle and excitement of holidays make the wrong atmosphere for introducing a new animal to a home and
beginning its training as a good pet. The animal could be inadvertently mistreated, injured or simply terrified -- as when enthusiastic givers wrap the little fellow as a "gift."

Also, remind area residents with pets that Christmas decorations can become dangerous playthings for curious animals -- nibbling poinsettia can poison a pet. Eating tinsel can result in impaction, and chewing electrical wiring can be hazardous to both pet and owner because of fire.

The holiday season is a good time for fund-raising for your organization -- check with local stores selling pet toys and other supplies to see if you can set up a canister for donations near the pet shelf. Stores may donate a portion of holiday sales. You can also issue press releases asking residents to contribute to your organization the same amount they spend on toys for their own pets.

By informing your community about responsible pet ownership, you can make the holiday season better for pets and people.

The HSUS accreditation program for humane societies and animal control agencies is being expanded with the addition of two accreditation associates.

Leslie Eustace, who comes to the HSUS from ASPCA in New York, will serve the western states and maintain an office in the new HSUS Rocky Mountain Regional Office in Denver. This office serves Colorado, Utah, Wyoming and Arizona, and the director is Don Cashen, formerly of the Indianapolis Humane Society. The office is located on South Bellaire St., Denver, CO 80222 - tel. (303) 759-8880.

Accreditation associate Hunt "Bill" Smith is based in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and can be reached at 4831 Springhill Dr., Tuscaloosa, AL 35401 - tel. (205) 533-8665. Smith is well known throughout the southeast for his many years of work devoted to improving animal shelters in the region.

HSUS accredits humane societies and animal control agencies that meet certain professional standards of operation. Complete information on accreditation requirements are available from HSUS Accreditation, 2100 L St., NW, Washington, DC 20037.

The Animal Welfare Act and you

by Margaret Morrison

Morrison is HSUS Animal Welfare Act Coordinator.

The federal Animal Welfare Act has the potential to be an effective tool for every humane society and animal shelter investigating certain cruelty cases.

Throughout the Act, the U.S. Department of Agriculture regulates animal dealers, research laboratories, zoos, circuses, and other forms of animal enterprises such as pet stores that sell wild animals, and common carriers.

The Act does not affect such groups as hobby breeders, retail pet stores that do not sell wild animals or dealers selling only to individuals and not to research laboratories or on the wholesale level.

The USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service through its regional offices, enforces regulations for the humane care, handling, treatment and transportation of animals. The Department can order facilities into compliance, and in extreme cases, levy fines, suspend or revoke licenses. The Animal Welfare Act can be used to supplement but not to replace cruelty prosecutions. In some instances where criminal prosecution has not been successful, action through the Act may stop the cruelty.

All too often, however, violators of the Act are simply warned. Animal Welfare Act cases can drag on for several years and the cruelty continues unabated. This commonly occurs when a cease and desist order or a 21-day license suspension is not sufficient incentive for the violator to comply fully with the Act.

Dr. Dale Schwindaman, head of the Animal Care Staff which administers the Act, says USDA finds it useful to work with local societies and law enforcement agencies which investigate cruelty cases.

A word of caution...in the past, USDA inspectors have been derelict in their duty to enforce the Act, and have filed misleading reports ignoring violations. Last year, the HSUS lost a cruelty case in which we considered the evidence very strong. The judge cited the fact that USDA had approved the facility.

We hope similar situations won't continue to occur and have been monitoring USDA's enforcement of the Act. APHIS officials have been conducting training programs to school their employees in the specifics of the Act and the proper way to conduct investigations.

You can help the USDA by informing them of violations. Animal Welfare Act enforcement is over-burdened and under-staffed. The funding provided by Congress is inadequate to assure that USDA can do an effective job.

Currently, USDA can inspect a facility on the average of twice per year. Six times should be the minimum. Therefore, USDA relies on reports of abuses and will schedule special inspections to investigate specific complaints. Dr. Schwindaman has said that he places great value on the reports of those professionally involved with animals.

In what is termed a "new approach," Aphis has assigned several employees to work only on the Act. Previously, all APHIS regional employees had been assigned to work on all others.