SWEATING
the Small Stuff

What does it take to run a progressive, lifesaving animal shelter? HSUS Shelter Services teams provide a tailored road map

BY JULIE FALCONER

A CAR CREEPS UP to the Dallas animal shelter one Tuesday evening, pausing in the shadows just beyond the security lights. The engine idles while a young woman, clasping a small bundle against her T-shirt, exits the passenger side and walks quickly to the after-hours animal depository, a bank of metallic gray boxes attached to the main building. A minute later, she's back in the car, empty-handed, and the vehicle disappears into the night.

Similar scenarios repeat until, 90 minutes after closing time, five dogs fill the drop boxes flanking the Lost and Found entrance. Two young Lab mixes huddle together in the recesses of one enclosure, while a fluffy black pooch, wild-eyed and defensive, charges the door in another.

On the front of each box is an intake form; the spaces for the owner's name, contact information, and reasons for giving up the animal are all empty. Only two sheets include a pet's name scrawled in the upper right corner. Gunther is a wirehaired gray terrier looking worried in the top row. Below him, a rhinestone-collared Chihuahua named Estrella trembles with fear.

Inside the Dallas Animal Services facility, the evening shift staff periodically removes animals from the drop boxes, making room for the next batch. A dispatcher routes cruelty calls, animal bite reports, and other emergencies to field officers scattered throughout the city. And on the opposite end of the building, a meeting led by a shelter evaluation team—comprising Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) staff and other sheltering professionals from across the country—is under way.

"Just walking through the shelter this afternoon, I see so many animals that are owner-surrendered, and I just don't get it," says a member of the shelter's citizen advisory board, addressing the experts listening sympathetically at the front of the conference room.

Others in the audience voice similar frustrations. Uninformed or uncommitted pet owners; abandonment, cruelty, and neglect; people who deny that their pet's litters contribute to overpopulation—these are tragic realities in communities across the nation. And based on the team's conversations with city officials and shelter staff earlier in the day, it's clear that Dallas has its share of these problems.

When the meeting adjourns, evaluation team member Shandra Koler walks past the off-hours depository and stops to peer inside the compartments. Thirteen more dogs, cats, and kittens have entered the boxes—joining the ranks of

the more than 36,000 animals who pass through this facility each year.

Koler makes notes on a pad of paper and follows her group to the parking lot. From now until half past midnight, she and her teammates have a lot to discuss.

A Profession Like No Other

To an outsider, the job of caring for a community's homeless pets can appear deceptively simple. But animal sheltering, as anyone in the field will affirm, is not like any other job.

Modern shelters incorporate a variety of social welfare functions under one roof: housing for the homeless, emergency room, adoption agency, domestic abuse haven, runaway hotline, food bank, mediation service, and family planning center. For shelters that also enforce animal cruelty and control laws, the elements of police work and neighborhood peacekeeping are added to the mix.

The estimated 3,500 shelters in the U.S. are their own independent entities, and they are not subject to any man-

They're not the shelter police, but the evaluation team could be deemed the shelter detectives. Here, Carolyn Machowski, HSUS manager of shelter services, observes Dallas animal services officers impounding a dog at the city's shelter.

datory universal standards or regulations. Whether operating as private nonprofits or government agencies, shelters vary widely in their leadership, animal care practices, and services to the community, with critical differences in size, facilities, budget, and staffing.

It's a tenet in the profession that animal shelters typically reflect the overarching socioeconomic, educational, and attitudinal realities of the communities they serve—particularly the prevailing feelings and practices related to animals. In some locales, the passion many people feel for helping homeless animals eventually leads to modern, pro-

gressive shelters buoyed by government support and committed donors and volunteers. But that same passion can also manifest in public suspicion about a shelter's operations. Sometimes, the concerns are warranted and can bring about positive change, but if handled poorly, they can cause rifts both internal and external.

This wild-card nature of community involvement is often a surprise to those just entering the field. Bruce Roney, who has twice served on HSUS evaluation teams, recalls laughing when Ottawa Humane Society board members asked during his job interview how he handles emotionally or politically charged issues. While Roney's background in nonprofit governance, fundraising, and policy development gave him a good start, he had no experience in animal sheltering. "I said, 'Listen, I'm coming from HIV and AIDs [work]. What could be more politically charged and emotional than that?'" says Roney, the shelter's executive director. "Well, little did I know, that would be animal welfare."

It's into these polarized environments that Carolyn Machowski and other staff in The HSUS's Shelter Services program must sometimes wade, giving the public an outlet for their concerns and using the final report as a tool for identifying both positive aspects of a shelter's operations and areas for improvement. Whether a shelter is doing the best it can with limited resources or hampering its own potential through poor decision-making and lack of focus, managers and staff stand a much better chance of improvement when animal advocates in the community are on their side.

With a long background in animal care, including 15 years as kennel operations supervisor for a municipal shelter in Baltimore, Machowski knows how hard it is for shelters to achieve success on all fronts. The all-too-common realities of too many animals, too few staff, not enough money, and the emotional rigors of the work can prevent many employees from seeing the big picture, she says. "You're focused on putting out fires and getting through yet another day of more animals coming in, and not enough space and not being able to find homes for them," she says. "And sometimes you need to step back and have an objective evaluation of your policies, procedures, and day-to-day activities."

The HSUS has offered that service since 1992, with the goal of reducing animal suffering and euthanasia by helping shelters tackle the roots of pet homelessness in their communities.

No Shelter is an Island

Before her plane touched down at Love Field, Machowski spent months preparing for the evaluation of Dallas Animal Services, a municipal animal care and control agency with about 130 employees.

She talked with local officials, shelter leaders, and community animal advocates. She studied staff charts, field reports, call logs, job descriptions, public comments, and the

city's animal ordinances. And she recruited experts from both government-run and private shelters to join her in Dallas.

During the site visit, the team members talk with employees at every level of operations, and accompany them as they perform their jobs. It's an intense undertaking, not only for the evaluators but also for the staff.

At introductory meetings on the first day, Machowski emphasizes the collaborative nature of the assignment: The evaluation is not an indictment. The team is not the shelter police. At the same time, they won't sugarcoat their findings. The purpose is to make the agency the best it can be—for the animals, the staff, and the community.

And she reminds the staff that the evaluators are their peers, people who understand the difficulties of their work. While shelters can be strong catalysts for change and develop progressive programs that create new hope for homeless animals, staff often feel blamed for the crisis of pet overpopulation. "We all know that's not the case," Machowski says to the Dallas employees. "The problems are happening out in the community, and you guys have to try to resolve [them]."

Throughout the four-day Dallas site visit, the community's role in the shelter's challenges is seldom out of view. Situated on a knoll in an industrial area near two highway interchanges, the 52,000-square-foot facility is divided into two wings. The adoptions entrance on the left opens into a spacious center with skylights and glassed-in enclosures where cats scamper up kitty condos or nestle in cushioned beds. It's the peaceful side of the building; the lobby is quiet and often empty. Meanwhile, the doors to the Lost and Found lobby open and close for a steady march of visitors: people surrendering family pets, owners searching for a lost dog or cat, and the occasional Good Samaritan dropping off a stray. Even with three people working the intake counter, there's usually a wait.

On the second day of the HSUS team's site visit, a woman seated near the soda machine is quietly weeping, waiting to hand over the longhaired gray cat in the carrier at her feet. Another woman with a stray cat to deliver looks hopeful as she scans the lost pet notices on the bulletin board. "Is this a calico?" she asks, holding up a cardboard box with a gray-striped tabby inside.

Leaving the facility is a young couple with a crate full of pit-bull mix puppies balanced between them. After a shelter employee explained that the animals might be euthanized because of the large number of similar puppies in the shelter, the couple has changed their minds about dropping them off. As they exit, the woman announces that she'll take the animals elsewhere and put up a "free" sign.

Next in line: two children and a man holding a tattered leash attached to a large mixed breed with a dirty coat and a hint of St. Bernard in her face. Splayed on the floor, the dog hugs the tile with her belly and paws, refusing to budge. Father and daughter giggle at each failed attempt to drag her toward the intake counter. The son sits cross-legged on the floor, holding a brindle-colored puppy by the hind legs and propelling the animal forward wheelbarrow-style.

Their dog has given birth and is pregnant again, the girl explains to an employee. A member of a rescue group overhears the conversation and offers a free spay surgery if the family will keep her. The man shakes his head and makes a dismissive gesture. They still have two of the dog's puppies at home; they don't want four dogs. After the paperwork is signed, a stony-faced kennel worker takes the cringing dog and her pup through the doors leading to the kennels at the back of the building.

Koler sits in a corner of the lobby, observing the dynamics at play. An animal health technician with Animal Control Services in Cleveland since 1999, she's no stranger to the stresses faced by shelter workers on the front lines. During brief lulls in the action, she asks about policies and looks over the shoulder of a worker entering information into a computer. The rest of the time, her attention is focused on how the staff handle the parade of people and pets coming through the door.

The People Paradox

Dallas Animal Services is working to alter the cultural mindsets that help generate this constant stream of stray and surrendered animals. At a class in responsible pet ownership, outreach coordinator Lisa Fullerton delivers some hard truths to owners of unsterilized pets. "The City of Dallas euthanizes over 28,000 dogs and cats a year," she tells the half dozen people at Wednesday's session. "That's just this facility. It doesn't include the county, and frankly they're just as bad. Our 12 puppy kennels are full year-round. Each year, 10,000 people are born versus 70,000 puppies and kittens." She speaks emphatically but rushes through the script so there'll be time for questions at the end—when she typically counters common misconceptions about pet sterilization.

More than 800 people have taken the class since October 2008. "There's a lot of 'aha' moments," Fullerton says. "… I've never had anyone not shocked when it comes to the numbers on spay/neuter."

Still, in a city of 1.2 million, she knows that change will not happen overnight. In the meantime, Fullerton and her co-workers grapple with the real suffering that results from unplanned litters.

Like people in other caregiving professions, shelter employees are vulnerable to compassion fatigue, a mental disorder likened to post-traumatic stress syndrome. Common symptoms include depression, apathy, hopelessness, and anger.

Unaddressed, compassion fatigue can lead to dysfunctional teams, high turnover, or situations like the one Karen Stimpson discovered when she became executive director of the Coastal Humane Society in Brunswick, Maine. The staff at the time had the conviction that "no one was going to be a good adoptive parent," says Stimpson, whose shelter was evaluated in 2010. "So everyone was greeted, if they were greeted at all, with a

surliness factor. And then they would have to beg to adopt an animal, and chances were they wouldn't make the cut."

Much of the attitude the public sometimes encounters at shelters derives from the stress of making life-and-death decisions every day. Even disinfection and vaccination protocols are much more than simple exercises in cleanliness and good health; animals in tight quarters can quickly spread disease that adds to their suffering and makes them less adoptable. And in many communities, despite concerted marketing efforts and collaboration with local rescue groups, certain animals are passed over repeatedly as an endless number of new pets streams in. Eventually, when no room and no money remain to care for or treat those still left behind, the problems created by society at large fall into the hands of one person: the euthanasia technician.

At the Dallas agency, shelter evaluation team member Jennifer Landis is assigned to assess the shelter's protocols for this critical function. A veterinarian with the Arizona Humane Society in Phoenix, which takes in 45,000 animals a year, she isn't daunted by the volume of animals in Dallas, and she understands the heartbreaking decisions shelters must sometimes make. Joining the evaluation team has given her an opportunity to help change that reality.

In a room off a back hallway where the procedure is performed, Landis gauges whether the shelter's euthanasia technicians are attentive to minimizing fear and discomfort in the animals. At the same time, she's assessing the working conditions for the staff who perform this difficult task. Are they well-trained in administering the drugs? Does the workload allow them to move at a gentle, unhurried pace? Are they allowed to opt out of euthanasia when they're feeling burned out? Are other staff supportive of them?

Peer Review

While they're not shelter police, the evaluation team could be deemed shelter detectives.

From the way the kennels drain to the type of cat litter used, no detail is too small to delve into. Kennel and cage dimensions, temperature and humidity in animal housing areas and the cargo compartments of field services vehicles, and noise levels in kennel rooms are all measured and recorded. The meticulousness is warranted: In animal sheltering, seemingly trivial mistakes—such as improper dilution of a germicide—can hurt animals or otherwise impact the entire operation.

At meal times and late in the evenings, the team members pool their information and observations. Conversations typically launch with "What's your take on …" or "How is the shelter handling …"—followed by a barrage of voices and fingers flipping through notepads.

The dynamics among frontline staff, supervisors, and municipal officials are analyzed. Community outreach programs are examined. The agency's practices and policies are compared with those of other shelters. Topics range from the pros and cons of 311 call systems (handling non-

Shelters are often so focused on the details of their daily work—from cleaning the cat cages to issuing citations to helping reunite lost pets with their owners—that it can be helpful to get a glimpse of the bigger picture.

emergency, animal-related calls to the city), to procedures for buying rooster chow to feed the victims of a recent cockfighting bust, to the contents of the unlabeled metal buckets in the off-loading bay where field officers bring in animals (flea powder, team member Paul Studivant reveals).

Studivant, division chief of St. Johns County Animal Control in Florida, describes his day with the agency's "sweep teams"—field services crews assigned to remove stray dogs from targeted districts. Mike Oswald, director of Multnomah County Animal Services in Oregon, leafs through budget printouts for an answer to Machowski's question about allocation of dog licensing revenue.

Through the constant give-and-take, the big picture of Dallas' operations gradually takes shape. At the same time, the evaluators are adding to their knowledge base, gaining tips they can apply to their own shelter operations back home.

The principle of learning from others' experiences is the foundation of the HSUS evaluation program. Contemporary best practices in animal sheltering have been developed and refined over many years and by multiple individuals and organizations. And the standards are always evolving to incorporate new technologies, innovative programs, and the latest research on animal housing, handling, and disease control.

The standards are also flexible enough to accommodate varying resource levels. "We're not going to recommend that a tiny rural shelter that can barely feed and clean needs to open a spay/neuter clinic the next month," says HSUS Shelter Services director Kim Intino. Instead, shelter staff might be advised to reach out to a local vet for help with the surgeries. "There need to be adjustments, and it needs to be by someone who understands the challenges."

In the ideal scenario, these peer recommendations help an already well-functioning agency learn to function even

better. In other cases, they act as a powerful impetus for change in municipalities with budgets that reflect the attitudes of a bygone era, when animal control and municipal pounds existed solely to dispose of stray dogs at as little cost to the community as possible. In such situations, the evaluation findings can persuade the local government that humane sheltering is a public responsibility—and provide the precise road map needed to move the agency to a better model.

In 2003, Intino led an assessment of a county-run shelter in North Carolina where three officers handled field response, and a single employee cared for more than 7,000 animals a year. In no uncertain terms, she told county leaders the staffing level wasn't close to adequate and urged them to hire more employees immediately. She backed up the statement with a chart based on formulas developed by the National Animal Control Association.

Fortunately, the county manager wanted to overhaul the shelter. Intino's recommendations gave him leverage to do so. County officials approved the hiring of more staff and agreed to replace the old facility, which resembled a shed more than a shelter. The new building, dubbed the Animal Adoption and Education Center to signify its commitment to serving animals and the community, opened in 2008.

The Greatest Gift

Sometimes the problems are less glaring—though not necessarily less challenging.

How do other shelters do this? Each time Stimpson of the Coastal Humane Society discussed finances and operations during a retreat with her board of directors last year, they kept returning to that question.

The need for an outside perspective led her to The HSUS, and in March, Machowski and a team of experts traveled to Maine for an evaluation. "I'm still astonished by all we learned," Stimpson says. Soon after, she and her staff cleared out years' worth of excess clutter, repainted the lobby, and removed negative and distracting signs papering the walls. The lobby is now airy and professional; visitors can focus on the animals instead of the chaotic décor.

Stimpson came to the job with a passion for animals and a background in fundraising and nonprofit administration, but she had no shelter experience. The evaluators encouraged the board to invest in her education about the field, she says. Other changes included revised cleaning and vaccination protocols, new partnerships with rescue groups, revamped rabbit housing, and new staff trainings—all before a final report had been delivered.

"The evaluation process and report is the greatest gift an executive director can ask for, because it puts some tooth behind the changes that are sometimes difficult to make through the staff and through the board," Stimpson says. "… It's taking the guesswork out of it."

Other HSUS evaluations have set in motion similar turnarounds. Following an assessment that spurred a change in leadership and increased funding at the Miami-Dade Animal Services Department, adoptions have tripled, animal care has vastly improved, animal rescue partnerships have grown to 60, and in 2009, volunteers donated more than 13,000 hours, says director Sara Pizano. And at Orange County Animal Services in North Carolina, delivery of a Shelter Services report aligned with community concern and board support, marking "a moment in the transition of animal sheltering and animal welfare in Orange County," says director Bob Marotto. Local officials increased the county's role in sheltering: They established Animal Services and hired Marotto to lead it, and they committed to building a facility and implementing pet sterilization and adoption programs—frequently consulting HSUS recommendations to gauge progress.

Before Dallas Animal Services can engage in similar self-reflection, The HSUS team still has a lot of work to do. Once back home, they'll continue comparing notes, gathering documentation, and posing tough questions: Are the shelter staffing levels and quality of animal care adequate? What kind of training exists for employees? Is there an accountability process in place for managers? How well do employees interact with the public? Are sufficient resources devoted to community outreach and education?

Answers will be compiled in a comprehensive report for city officials—the first step in a process that requires long-term commitment from all parties. Like other shelters before it, Dallas will be advised to form an implementation task force, and HSUS Shelter Services staff will remain partners in the endeavor, a resource to call upon in the years to come.

Evaluations often result in some recommendations that may take months or years to implement—or to have a measurable impact. But other changes are set in motion before HSUS teams even depart for the airport. At the wrap-up meetings that typically conclude site visits, evaluators summarize their findings and list issues shelter leaders should address before final reports are delivered.

In Dallas, that meeting will mark the end of a productive week that started with a straightforward request from city officials: "Give us things we can fix, and tell us how we can fix them."

Four days later, the team enters the city's downtown office buildings, prepared to do just that. **AS**

The Shelter Services program of The Humane Society of the United States understands the challenges that shelters face—whether they are large or small, government or nonprofit, rural or urban. Animal care and control agencies often struggle to find the necessary balance between community expectations and available resources. Shelter Services can help organizations acquire the tools they need for long-term stability and success. For more information, go to animalsheltering.org/shelter_services*, or contact the program's staff at 202-452-1100;* shelterevaluations@humanesociety.org.