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Animal Shelter Programs and Policies

**By Edwin J. Sayres, Madison, N.J.,
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A discussion of policies and programs that, ideally, should be followed by humane societies in the operation of shelters and the limitations that are imposed by finances, local circumstances, and other factors is a substantial undertaking. I would like, first, to give you some background information about St. Hubert's Giralda and hope that what I have to say will contribute something to people confronted with the problems of shelter management and animal control programs.

Our methods and approach were basically acquired from material available through national and state organizations in this field. We are especially indebted to the Union County SPCA Kindness Kennels in Rahway, New Jersey, for their help when it was decided that St. Hubert's Giralda would offer a pet animal warden service to our community.

After a survey we found that the most needed service to our local municipalities was an agency that would and could handle the pets and small animal problems. Since 1958 we have enrolled eight municipalities, covering an area of 90 square miles with a human population of 120,000, 7,500 licensed dogs, an undetermined number of cats, and an undetermined number of strays. We handle about 2,500 animals per year.

We found that most existing laws were antiquated, impractical, and useless. I believe I can safely say that this holds true in virtually every community around the country. A hodge-podge of legislation relating to animal control has accumulated through the years, pertinent at the time of enactment, but most of it now rendered almost unenforceable by the very extent of its detail. A new approach of placing responsibility where it belongs—upon the owner rather than the animal—has long been advocated, as you know, by The HSUS. St. Hubert's Giralda took the opportunity to put it into practice.

Our first step was to suggest control laws that would not cause hardship to the pet owners or the animals themselves and would also include benefits to the non-pet owner and the general welfare of the community.

In our explanation in support of good animal control laws we emphasized that pets kept under control are not exposed to injury and death on the roads, do not cause traffic problems, nor are they apt to come in

contact with rabid wildlife. The public health of the community is protected and nuisance complaints are also reduced.

The cooperation of municipal authorities and key public officials is essential to the proper implementation of an effective program. When properly approached, these authorities will generally support a practical and enforceable program and, in many cases, they will be glad to relinquish the responsibility of animal control to a community-respected humane organization. Our experience has been that many local officials, charged with responsibility of administering an animal control program, lack the knowledge and ability to do the job. They are involved in an area of administration that is, perhaps more than any other, subject to public criticism when improperly handled and they are consequently susceptible to a persuasive approach.

In our own particular case, we found it necessary to enlist the support of (1) the board of health, (2) law and public safety commissioners, (3) the local court, and (4) newspapers and radio. All of these agencies were most cooperative when we pointed out how necessary it was to have their support not only, initially, to enforce a law which would be in the best interests of both the animals and people of the community, but also in carrying out the essential aspects of our proposed animal control program.

It is as easy to dissipate community respect for a humane society as it is difficult to establish the right kind of relationship in the first place. Physical aspects of society work are, therefore, vitally important since they establish the organization's public image—good, bad, or indifferent. For example, the excellence of a humane education program will be damaged extensively by the existence of sub-standard conditions at the animal shelter, or by field service that is slow and haphazard. At the same time, however, operation of the shelter must not become the entire service to the community. Rather, it should be the focal point around which related services are built.

At St. Hubert's Giralda we try to remember that the animal control officer, on call or on patrol, is our direct contact with the public. His efficiency in performance is a tremendous factor in molding community opinion of our program. Field service must be prompt, efficient, and understanding. Cruelty cases must be handled firmly and with dispatch. Correction of inhumane conditions must be pursued vigorously and to whatever extent is necessary to remedy specific situations. This phase of activity, like others in an effective animal shelter program, must be handled by full-time personnel with adequate compensation. Volunteer workers serve their best purpose in supplementing the "professional" humane worker.

Pet adoption policies carry a responsibility that is too often overlooked. All of us know it is impossible to find homes for all of the unwanted animals

that are bred and all of us know that many adopted female pets are going out of shelters to create a progeny that will eventually require disposition through our shelters' euthanasia facilities. A female dog or cat, cheerfully released to an adopter, will most surely increase our already staggering overload of work unless our adoption policies include a requirement for spaying. Unspayed female animals that are released only perpetuate the very condition that brought them to the shelter in the first place. The biggest single factor in any adoption policy should, therefore, be spaying of female animals.

We all know that the operation of an animal shelter provides an essential but temporary remedy of effects. We know, too, that obsession with the "cure" can blind us to the prevention that will be achieved ultimately through a comprehensive humane education program.

A humane education program is a related service but its importance should not be minimized by this fact. It offers a far-reaching solution that can significantly affect the treatment of animals in centuries to come. I sometimes think this kind of program is neglected because immediate results are not often achieved. Disregard of its importance on this count would be a sad mistake. If we must have something immediate, we can have that, too. An effective and continuing humane education program will add stature to any society in the eyes of the community it serves. It goes beyond the physical functions of shelter operation and disseminates knowledge on the causes of animal welfare problems to a community that is probably more misinformed than wilfully cruel.

Lectures, appropriate movies, and the distribution of literature are the best methods of implementing such a program. Always, of course, help should be offered to any group or community within the scope of the society that is formulating a pet program. Letters to the editors of newspapers can help to publicize certain issues and problems where widespread support is needed. In general, every opportunity to spread information about animal welfare and specific problems should be used to advantage.

I have been speaking, until now, about the policies and programs of private shelters and how to fulfil their objectives. We cannot exclude, however, a second type of operation—the municipal or city pound.

An increasing number of public pounds can be brought up to humane standards by conscientious effort on the part of the local humane society. Here, again, cooperation from local officials is essential and we, in turn, must recognize the unique aspects of this kind of operation.

The budget is generally small. It often precludes establishment of a satisfactory program of animal adoption and public relations—usually thought of as simply extra expense. We have to recognize this in our dealings with public pounds but we should insist on, as a minimum, humane euthanasia methods and clean kennels, adequately manned and

properly equipped. Extra services in many cases must be provided by volunteer humane workers. Such extra services might include the placement of animals, distribution of literature, or just keeping an eye on the operation. Although budgets may impose restrictions upon public pound operations, we can recognize it and work accordingly toward an improvement of standards.

We, at St. Hubert's Giralda, felt the need to keep the public aware of our services, the laws of the communities we serve, and the various situations pertaining to the animal world. We had to resort, upon occasion, to paid advertising and, of course, we have always maintained a flow of letters to the public, welcoming inquiries and inviting people to visit the shelter for consultation.

Constant explanation in one form or another, cooperation from municipal officials and the press and radio, all of these things contribute to an effective and successful community pet control program and an orderly public or private shelter operation.

Success is always related to effort. How well we succeed will depend upon the effort we make. In our own case, I can tell you that, after five years, there has been a substantial increase in the number of animals reclaimed, a big decrease in the number destroyed, and an annual increase in the number of adoptions. Nuisance calls have dropped to a healthy ratio and our membership continues to grow.

We have done no more than you can; we may not even have done as well as some other organizations. But we believe that every humane society must adopt policies that, although deviating in some respects from the ideal, will lead to development of a rational, practical, and most important, humane program.