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DEATH AT THE POUND: Kill rates rise as city neglects best solution

Euthanasia -- and costs -- drop where government backs spay-neuter clinics

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Second in a three-part series.

As cities across the country reduce the number of unwanted pets they kill, the euthanasia room at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg animal shelter is getting busier.

In a single day recently, it was the last resting place for a litter of gray kittens, a friendly black Labrador and more than 50 other dogs and cats -- all killed with a shot of muscle relaxant that stopped their hearts.

The Observer found that while the city spends more than \$4 million a year to catch, house and kill animals, it has done little to address the cause of the problem: the exploding population of unwanted pets.

Charlotte puts no public money toward spaying and neutering and has done less than many cities to increase adoptions or public awareness of sterilization.

"It's atrocious," said Ron Simons, a former Charlotte Animal Control supervisor who heads a local group pushing for more spaying and neutering. "Every day, we're killing healthy, adoptable animals. I'm tired of putting down this many animals when there's a solution."

A report to Charlotte City Council late last year recommended changes. It called the current system -- which kills seven of every 10 animals at the shelter, more than 14,000 last year -- "an unconscionable waste of life and a needless drain on public money."

The Observer found:

--The city kills 19 animals a year for every 1,000 Mecklenburg County residents, one of the higher rates among cities its size in the country. The national average is 16, according to an annual survey, and cities such as Phoenix and Portland have lowered their rates to eight by changing their approaches.

--Seven months after the city report that recommended changes, the most effective reforms have yet to be enacted. Animal control officials say they need more time to develop a plan, and formed a committee this month, after an interview with Observer reporters.

--The city hasn't invested public money to increase animal sterilizations or target low-income communities that experts say need spay-neuter services most. For two decades, officials have left sterilization to the Humane Society of Charlotte.

--Officials have provided little oversight of the Humane Society, which operates under a city contract. No one noticed the group hadn't submitted a budget, as required, to the city for three years. City officials couldn't agree on who was responsible for monitoring the Humane Society's work.

--The city only recently began considering strategies to help increase awareness of the growing animal population and promote adoption at the city shelter, where adoption rates remain below the national average, according to the city report.

Officials say Charlotte's Animal Control Bureau is trying to change its approach, but reform will take time and resources.

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to go in and pump a lot of money into spaying and neutering as many animals as we can willy-nilly," said Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Chief Darrel Stephens, who said a detailed plan is needed first. His department includes Animal Control, which serves the entire county.

The city has other priorities, too, he added, and shouldn't bear the full blame for the problem, which is created by irresponsible pet owners.

Animal Control officers see the results often, such as the call last month from an elderly woman in a poor north Charlotte neighborhood. She wanted them to take her dog away. When Officer Shannon Corkwell arrived, the woman said she simply couldn't care for the black Labrador mix named Jasmine. The woman led Corkwell to the back yard, where the dog was tied to a 2-foot metal chain. Instead of a collar, a coat hanger twisted around her neck.

"You know we'll probably put her to sleep don't you?" Corkwell asked as she petted the dog, which licked her face.

"Yes, that's OK," the woman said. "When I got her, she was such a little thing, and she curled up on the couch with me. But I can't take care of a big dog like this. I'm 79." Jasmine was killed that night. Her owner didn't plan to grieve. "I'm going to try to get me another little one before too long."

A better way of managing

For years, Charlotte's Animal Control officers did little more than catch and kill strays. Then several workers went to an Arizona conference in fall 2000, where they learned the latest ideas used in other cities to curb animal death rates. They wanted to bring those strategies here.

The result: The Community Animal Management Program, developed with several animal welfare groups and volunteers from Leadership Charlotte. The plan has five major steps:

--Increase sterilizations and public education, especially in low-income areas.

--Increase the number of animals adopted from the shelter.

--Embed microchips in animals who leave the shelter so, if they're picked up as strays, the owners can be identified.

--Trap and neuter feral cats.

--Help pet owners train their adopted animals so they don't develop behavioral problems and get returned to the shelter.

So far, Animal Control has made strides on two steps, adoptions and microchipping. It now places updated pictures of animals offered for adoption on the Internet and recruits volunteers who take animals to Wal-Mart on weekends to shop for new owners. It's also spending \$47,000 this year to embed microchips in animals from the shelter, paid through higher fees from the new owners.

But adoptions and microchipping aren't expected to have a major impact. "It is only through spaying and neutering," the plan says, "that shelter admissions will be reduced."

Officials initially said they had no immediate plans to spend public money on sterilization programs. As recently as last month, Capt. Tammy Williams, who heads Animal Control, said the city is "not in the business of spaying and neutering, and we don't want to be in that business anytime in the near future."

Williams now says the city will take a different approach. The city learned this month it has won a \$25,000 grant that it will spend to help low-income people get their pets neutered. To fulfill the full city strategy, though, will require additional planning, Williams said. A funding request to the City Council could take a year or more.

"You don't just walk across the street and ask for half a million or even \$50 without a strategic plan to validate it," she said.

Even so, supporters say one of the most compelling arguments for more spaying and neutering is that it could save city money.

In New Hampshire, a statewide program cut the cost of neutering pets to \$10 for poor residents. The state saved \$3 in animal control costs for every \$1 spent on the program. And it saved animals' lives. Over an eight-year period between 1993 and 2001, the state recorded a nearly 75 percent drop in the number of dogs and cats killed.

"The folks in Charlotte don't have to invent anything," said Peter Marsh, a national consultant on pet population who helped implement the New Hampshire program. "The model is right there in other cities."

The International City/County Management Association says dozens of cities have opened government-subsidized spay-neuter clinics or provided vouchers to low-income residents. Others have passed laws requiring all pet owners to sterilize their animals unless they pay for a breeder permit.

Whatever the strategy, it's up to government agencies to take the lead, experts say.

"You need public money" to succeed, Marsh said. "It's absolutely critical, because you can't raise enough private money, and you need to have money year in and year out."

Efforts fall behind

Two decades ago, the Charlotte Humane Society and its executive director, Patti Lewis, pushed the city to let the group open the first low-cost spay-neuter clinic in the state.

The city began requiring every animal adopted from its shelter to be sterilized at the clinic. And in 1992, the city moved its pound to a new facility and began leasing two former shelter buildings to the Humane Society for \$1 a year.

For years, the clinic worked. Immediately after it opened, the annual number of animals killed dropped from 15,079 to 9,551. But in the past decade, the numbers have risen again, and the city has done little to keep up.

The wait for spay-neuter surgeries has grown to more than a month, and Lewis says the society can't handle the volume of pets without more resources.

"It's a very tiny clinic," she said. "I can't put more people in there because they're stumbling over themselves now."

One thing that could help keep euthanasias down, experts say, is making it easier for low-income pet owners to get their animals sterilized. That's important because poorer people are traditionally less likely to spay and neuter pets. About 80 percent of animal control calls nationwide originate in low-income communities.

Although pet owners at the Humane Society clinic pay less than half the surgery's cost at a private vet's office, experts say \$30 for cats and \$40 for dogs is still more than many low-income residents are willing or able to spend.

"You've got this whole segment of society that's going to have pets, and they're not going to have the money to get them spayed and neutered," said Dr. Marty Davis, a veterinarian at Monroe Road Animal Hospital.

Charlotte's city manager sets the fees for the Humane Society clinic, which are the same no matter a pet owner's income. Other cities have reduced the charges to as low as \$10 or even free for residents who qualify.

City Manager Pam Syfert said last week she relies on the Humane Society to ask for fee changes and has never considered a sliding scale.

"You're raising some policy issues about how you handle the animal population, and I'm not the right person to talk to about that," she said.

Animal Control has helped organize special clinics in low-income neighborhoods, but they've asked other animal welfare groups to pick up the sterilization costs. At three clinics in the past year and a half, 77 animals have been neutered. At the next clinic, the city plans to pay for the surgeries with the grant money it received recently, officials said last week.

Oversight is uncertain

City leaders have done little to oversee the Humane Society. Under the spay-neuter contract with the group, city officials can inspect the society's books and should receive annual budgets.

Lewis said the city used to visit yearly and look over financial records, but that hasn't happened recently. And city budget officers didn't notice that the society didn't provide a budget for the past three years until The Observer asked for copies last month.

"Through miscommunication or misunderstanding of roles, the budget used to come to the budget department for review, then go to police," city spokesman Rick Davis said, "and that has not happened."

City officials couldn't agree who should provide oversight.

"I can't answer that," Chief Stephens said. "Our only relationship with them is that they fulfill the spay-neuter contract. We don't even manage the contract. I think that's the city manager's office or the city attorney."

The city manager's office, however, said animal issues are the police department's responsibility.

"Quite frankly," said Davis after checking with the manager's office, "animal control is really not on anybody's radar screen up there."

Cities that manage to stem their animal kill rates don't stop with sterilization. They often pair those services with extensive public education.

Those efforts let the public know the size of the problem and what happens to thousands of unwanted pets every year. Cities have taken out billboards, allowed euthanasias to be recorded and shown by news media, and walked shelter dogs wearing the dates they'll be killed if they aren't adopted.

Charlotte spends nothing on television, print or billboard advertisements, although private groups have occasionally funded such efforts.

Williams allowed Observer reporters and a photographer to view euthanasias, but wouldn't permit pictures of animals being injected or dead bodies.

"We don't think we need to shock the community by showing them 50 dead animals," said Williams, who added that the bureau is upfront about its euthanasia rates.

Speakers spread the word

The bureau's main method of convincing people to neuter their pets is sending speakers to schools, city events and neighborhood meetings.

"Are we in the schools enough now? No," Williams said. "Are we going to try to improve that? Yeah. We've got to do more to get the word out."

This month, Charlotte City Council raised pet license fees for the first time since 1992. Owners now will pay \$2.50 more per year for a sterilized animal and \$5 more for an unaltered animal.

That will bring in more than \$80,000 a year in extra revenue. Some animal welfare advocates want that money to go toward spaying and neutering.

But right now, it's set to be folded into the city's general fund, with none designated specifically for animal programs.

Chief Stephens said it's not good policy to designate fee revenue for a specific use, because the city's priorities may change. Fees, though, are frequently used to fund other local government functions, including parks, building inspectors and utilities.

"The license fees are part of the general fund, and that's where our budget comes from anyway," Stephens said. "So you could say we already get that money back."

The bureau is trying to find other ways to pay for its efforts, including more private grants. Animal Control workers say they hate killing animals, and their goal is to do it as little as possible. But as long as the unwanted pet population grows, there's no alternative. Shelters and rescue groups can't save them all.

"We do not take pleasure in what we do," Williams said. "But we're the only ones who do it."