

Plan to save cats, dogs gets OK

By Matt Cooper

The Register-Guard

Published: July 24, 2008 12:00AM



Kevin Clark/The Register-Guard

Humphrey, an older dog up for adoption at Lane County Animal Services, watches a visitor. The shelter is having an Adopt-A-Buddy event this week.

The Lane County commissioners on Wednesday unanimously approved an ambitious plan to save more dogs and cats at the county shelter, but critics say they'll remain skeptical until there is more progress on the ground.

Meanwhile, a ranking member of an advisory committee has accused the shelter of killing adoptable cats, and a rocky transition in shelter management has ended in criticism of the new supervisor and the threat of a lawsuit.

Officials have called animal services a top priority for citizens, and the shelter has been under scrutiny since advocates last year pushed for changes to save more dogs and cats. The county board on Wednesday adopted a work plan for 2008-09 that the advisory committee and the shelter will tackle together in areas such as euthanasia, adoptions and licensing.

County officials say the shelter is on the right track, stating that of more than 3,300 dogs and cats impounded last year, only 11 dogs and one cat were put down due to overcrowding, and none since October.

But those numbers are challenged by past and present members of the Lane County Animal Services Advisory Committee, a citizens group organized by the county board to guide changes at the shelter.

Committee member Scott Bartlett said the statistics require more scrutiny and Tamara Barnes, who left the committee recently due to time constraints, said the shelter can categorize animals however it chooses to show a drop in kill rates.

Harsher criticism was delivered by the co-chairwoman of the committee, Debi McNamara, who in an e-mail said twice in April she visited shelter cats she described as affectionate and adoptable, only to return days later to find the animals had been put down as medically untreatable or difficult to handle.

In written testimony to the committee this month, McNamara questioned shelter supervisor Tom Howard's oversight and said she doesn't trust the shelter to assess animals correctly.

"This is why there is absolutely no trust from the animal welfare community for the euthanasia decisions made at (the shelter)," McNamara wrote. "The staff who currently make euthanasia decisions can, and do, label animals as 'medically' and 'behaviorally' untreatable when they are not."

Karen Gaffney, assistant director of Health and Human Services, stood by the numbers and county staff's assessment of animals.

She said the new euthanasia policy will make it easier for the public to understand why the shelter decides to put certain animals down. The policy will include verifiable medical or behavioral criteria for the decision and a review panel staffed in part with people outside the shelter.

"There have been questions about our process for deciding which animals are adoptable or not adoptable," Gaffney said. "By having this review process and the clear criteria, that allows us to be transparent and the community will be able to see why we're making the decisions that we're making."

Howard moved into the shelter's top spot when program manager Mike Wellington's position was eliminated in budget cuts before this fiscal year, Gaffney said.

Wellington has filed notice of a potential tort claim regarding his treatment by the county, including charges of retaliation, failure to reinstate him following medical leave and disclosure of private facts to the news media. He would not comment Wednesday, and his attorney did not return a phone call.

Despite unrest at the management level, commissioners Bill Fleenor and Bill Dwyer said they are encouraged by the shelter's progress, including the addition of online licensing, a Web site with viewable animals, and movement toward making the service financially self-supporting.

But animal advocates want the shelter to take a bigger step by overhauling its operation in favor of the "no-kill" strategy of Nathan Winograd, director of the No Kill Advocacy Center in Oakland, Calif.

Winograd promotes a number of programs and services in an effort to eliminate the need to reduce shelter populations with euthanasia. The shelter could adopt Winograd's strategies without a big increase in personnel, advocates say.

But Faye Stewart, chairman of the county board, said such lofty goals for animals will require an expansion of the shelter, a move for which the county doesn't have funding.

"Until we have a facility that has more capacity, it's going to be very difficult to meet the requirements of being able to adopt out all adoptable animals," Stewart said.