

Animal shelter faces criticism from task force

By Matt Cooper The Register-Guard

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The Lane County animal shelter says it is trying to increase adoptions and lower the number of animals that are put down, but change isn't coming fast enough for some animal advocates.

The co-chairwoman of a county-appointed shelter task force said Monday that the shelter manager and a supervisor should resign, citing what she called a pattern of poor planning, management and judgment.

The criticism reveals passionate and clashing opinions about whether the shelter is doing enough to adopt out cats and dogs rather than put them down.

Last year, the shelter said it received about 2,000 dogs and euthanized almost 300 because they were unadoptable or because there was no room to keep them. The shelter euthanized slightly more than half of the 1,600 cats it received, citing the same reasons.

Critics say the shelter can do much better.

Molly Sargent, co-chairwoman of the Save Adoptable Animals Task Force, said the county refuses to adopt a progressive approach to placing more animals in homes. In a recent e-mail to the county board and local media, Sargent called for program manager Mike Wellington and supervisor Tom Howard to step down.

Wellington has been program manager for seven years. Howard has been supervisor for almost a year.

"There has been no customer service improvement, there has been no staff attitude improvement, there has been no plan to take (Lane County Animal Services) from a catch-and-kill facility to a progressively thinking one, there has been no leadership shown in any respect to the staff of LCAS," Sargent wrote. "We are tired of waiting for improvements that never come. We demand transparency and accountability" from county animal services and from the Lane County commissioners.

Animal welfare is a priority — and an emotional issue — for many Lane County residents, officials have said. The county board established the task force earlier this year to study how the shelter could improve adoptions and animal care.

Sargent's criticism comes just as the shelter is making changes in response to recommendations from the committee that she helped run. The shelter will create a panel that must approve euthanasia of adoptable animals, recruit volunteers to foster animals and make other changes as it tries to adopt out more cats and dogs, said Rob Rockstroh, county director of health and human services.

But Sargent and another task force member, Diana Robertson, said the county plans to make only minimal changes and fails to embrace an innovative approach to placing as many animals as possible. Robertson said, for example, that it's unclear whether the shelter will spay or neuter all animals just before they go into adoptive homes, as the task force recommended.

Sargent and Robertson criticized the county's recent seizures of about 100 dogs and cats from allegedly negligent owners, saying Wellington seized the animals without planning for how to house them.

But Wellington said animal groups occasionally have tipped off owners who were the target of seizure operations and that it's difficult and ineffective to provide advance warning to the groups.

"You can't announce to the world you're going to go to somebody's house and go in and take their animals," he said. "Normally, we don't know what's in there and what's going on (until the seizure)."

Wellington rejected Sargent's criticisms, saying the shelter has handled the flood of additional dogs and cats, won't have to euthanize adoptable animals and is providing adequate care.

"I'm happy about how, when times get real tough, our staff pulls together and makes things happen," he said.

Rockstroh also defended Wellington and shelter staff. He said the shelter is "trying to go in the right direction" and that it deserves the chance to implement task-force recommendations before being judged.

The shelter must balance the obligation to enforce animal-welfare laws with the community expectation that it place as many cats and dogs as possible, Rockstroh said.

It must do this in an environment in which county funding is dropping and there are not enough volunteers or kennels for the dogs and cats that the county shelter receives, he said.

"In real practical matters, we need more staff, volunteers and kennel space, and we're working on those things," Rockstroh said.

Even on the task force, there is disagreement about the county shelter. The other co-chairman, C.T. Fulkerson, said Wellington and the shelter are making changes for the better.

"I have seen a very definite (improvement) in attitude and the number of animals being euthanized," he said.