

## Negligent Pet Owners Get a Frosty Reception

In Carroll County, Maryland, excuses no longer cut ice

BY CARRIE ALLAN

Every winter in rural Westminster, Md., animal control officers from the Humane Society of Carroll County get calls about pets left outside with no access to drinkable water. Temperatures often drop into the teens in the area, and the water bowls left outdoors turn into miniature ice rinks—useless to dogs who don't want to end up with their tongues stuck to the frozen surface.

When officers check in with owners, they usually hear the same defensive reaction: "I just changed his water an hour ago! That water is brand new!" Local laws stipulate that animals kept outdoors during the winter must have access to fresh water, and that the water must be changed at least twice daily. Pet owners tend to shape their excuses around that rule, spinning tales of how their own regular watering has been undermined by the vicious assault of the freezing temperatures.

In the past, Carroll County officers looked skeptically at the bowls and buckets in question, which often appeared to have been frozen long enough to contain dinosaur remains. *Yeah, right, you changed the water an hour ago*, they often thought. But without a way to challenge the facts, they could only remind pet owners of the law and ask them to be more diligent about changing their pets' water.

Executive director Nicky Ratliff grew tired of hearing the same old story, so a few years ago she and her officers conducted their own experiment on the shelter's loading dock. On a bitterly cold day—the outdoor temperature started around 17 degrees Fahrenheit and never rose above 25—shelter staff filled two three-gal-



In Maryland, Carroll County's animal control officers have science on their side when pet owners' excuses don't hold water. MICHELLE RILEY/THE HSUS

lon buckets, one metal and one plastic, with water and left them outside to see what would happen.

The cold affected the water in the metal bucket more quickly, but some four hours later, even the water in that bucket had developed only  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch of ice. The water in the plastic bucket had only a thin layer on top. Overnight, staff tested the freeze rates on standard pet water bowls as well. Nine-inch plastic and metal bowls were filled with 4 inches of water; the next morning—about 16 hours later—each bowl had only around  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch of ice. Neither was anywhere close to frozen solid.

Ratliff's officers have used the results to show defensive owners that what they claim about their pet's water supply wouldn't hold up in court. "People will try to tell you they just put fresh water

in and you're looking at four inches of ice, and you know that it's been much, much longer," says Ratliff.

The initial temperature of the water will affect the speed at which it freezes, of course, and shelters in other climates will get different results from their own tests. Ratliff recommends finding a truly neutral witness to perform the experiment. "If you call a local high school and get one of their science classes, the kids can conduct the test for you," she says. "It would make a great science project." **AS**