



Animal control and codes director Curtis Childress shares tips on how to handle court cases with a class of reservists. The volunteers go through four half-day trainings and take an exam before graduating.



ACR Elaine Kaufmann takes one of the court-held pit bulls for a stroll. The animal control department is responsible for the dogs until their owners' trials are complete. Some of the dogs are shy and still unaccustomed to this basic form of interaction.



ACR Maryln Zahler comforts a young German shepherd at the remote location where the animal control department's court-held dogs are kept. Zahler helped start the reserve program and coordinates the volunteers' hours.



County commissioner D. Kent Evans shakes hands with the ACOs and ACRs honored by the commission during Animal Control Officer Appreciation Week.



ACO Paul Richardson cradles a young pup he plans to foster for the shelter.



ACR Peggy Mirimian cares for Tina, a 10-year-old emaciated thoroughbred mare. Tina had been tied up in a field with no access to water before being rescued by ACO MaryLou Ward and ACR Maryln Zahler.

A Little Help

FOR A LOT OF TERRITORY

In one New Mexico county, animal control volunteers help the pros provide better service

BY CHERYL A. FALLSTEAD

Faced with handling almost 14,000 calls a year in a territory that covers more than 3,800 square miles, the Doña Ana County Animal Control Department in New Mexico is trying something new: using animal control volunteers for tasks that don't require specialized training, thereby freeing up the department's eight full-time officers for more demanding duties. Two classes of animal control reservists (ACRs) are already trained and on the job, backing up their professional colleagues on tasks ranging from public education efforts to creating specifications for the county's new disaster relief vehicle.

One of the southernmost counties in the state, Doña Ana County is home to New Mexico's second-largest city, Las Cruces, which has its own animal control department. But surrounding the city is an enormous desert county, spotted with small communities and rural homes where some people don't know about animal control regulations—or believe the laws and codes don't apply to them, says animal control and codes director Curtis Childress.

Such locales are hard on both people and animals; the extreme southern portion of the county is "like a frontier out there, like homesteaders," says Tom Hoeksema, a retired college professor and administrator participating in the animal control reserve program.

In a state that enacted its law against cockfighting only last year, and where successful prosecutions for dogfighting are still uncommon, Doña Ana County's animal control department is gaining a reputation for professionalism and dedication. The department was

recently given an award by the state attorney general's Animal Cruelty Task Force, and was among the finalists for two 2008 awards from the National Animal Control Association—one recognizing the whole department, and one recognizing criminal investigator Robyn Gojkovich.

"Word is getting out that southern New Mexico is not going to be a haven for [dogfighters and cockfighters] anymore," said Heather Ferguson, legislative director of the nonprofit Animal Protection of New Mexico, at a recent gathering of officers and volunteers. Ferguson laughingly added that when she logs on to a notorious cockfighting website, the users are always complaining about the ACOs' vigilance.

And the agency has plenty on its plate, gaining recent attention not only for the successful prosecution of the state's first cockfighting case, but for coping with a rash of animal hoarding and cruelty cases. Its 2007 caseload included twin brothers arrested for dogfighting (the agency seized 53 pit bulls); a man who had tried to run his own shelter and was found with 140 dogs, 80 cats, and a number of birds and horses; a woman living with her mother, son, and 146 sick and dying cats infected with feline AIDS and leukemia (another 63 dead cats were found on the property); and a major puppy and kitten mill bust. Last year, 631 animals were seized in the county's hoarding and animal cruelty cases.

Filling a Hole

It was in response to this ever-increasing caseload that MaryIn Zahler, 76, came up with the idea of using



ACR Tom Hoeksema heads out to deliver an animal trap.

animal control volunteers. Zahler, who has volunteered on two shelter boards and been involved in a number of animal advocacy organizations, brought her idea to friend and then-animal control supervisor Ellie Choate. Together, they worked on the concept, tossing around ideas until they had a plan to present to Sheriff Todd Garrison, who oversees the animal control department.

The sheriff's department already has several active volunteer groups, and Garrison was open to the idea of a similar group to support the overworked ACOs. "When people want to help, we want to get them in and let them help—be part of the team," says Garrison.

An initial challenge to the idea was the issue of liability: What if a volunteer got hurt on the job, or did something that resulted in a lawsuit? But working with the risk management department, Childress, Garrison, and Zahler were able to get the reservists covered under the same workers' compensation, liability, and vehicle insurance policies as the county's employees. Volunteers, Childress says, have essentially the same coverage as employees.

Once over this hurdle, they were able to focus on developing recruitment and training programs. Reserve volunteers must pass a rigorous screening process. Before they begin training, they complete an application, get fingerprinted, go through background checks,

and are interviewed by Childress, Zahler, and ACO supervisor Joe Jacques.

It is essential, Childress says, to make sure you're getting the right people. "Do the proper research, background, and interviews as for any other employee," he says. Garrison agrees, pointing out that every officer and reservist represents the department.

Once approved, volunteers go through four half-day training sessions, which include instruction on animal identification, use of equipment, capture techniques, safety, interview techniques, snake identification (taught by reservist and herpetologist Frank Bryce), zoonoses, courtroom presentations and ethics, animal ordinances, hoarding issues, and animal crime photography. Trainees receive classroom training on defensive driving and practice driving the animal control truck. They also attend standard employee training programs, and can participate in special in-service trainings available to the officers, such as evidence handling and courtroom testimony.

Backing up the Pros

While the concept was in development, there was a change of leadership within the department. Choate, who had helped build and gain approval for the concept, left and was replaced several months later by Childress. Childress had 22 years of experience as a police officer, and was once a trainer for the police department, but had no background in animal control.

Criminal investigator Gojkovich also has extensive law enforcement experience. She specializes in child and animal abuse and has investigated numerous cases of animal cruelty, including New Mexico's first successful dogfighting prosecution back in 2001, 20 years after the law passed. Gojkovich has handled many other serious abuse and neglect cases, including the felony investigation of a young man who'd hung a dog to death with an electrical cord. She is assigned to the animal control department part time and provides support with cases that are beyond the scope of the ACOs.

Unlike most of the ACOs, Gojkovich and Childress are both sheriff's deputies, which means they can carry guns and make arrests. While they're there to help handle serious criminal offenders, even the non-deputized animal control officers may confront difficult and potentially violent people in the field. The department's ACOs have each attended all or part of the National Animal Control Association's training programs. (Future hires will go through a 6-week on-the-job field training and evaluation program that Childress has adapted from the city's program.)

When officers arrive at a home to respond to a complaint, their goal is to keep the interaction polite and professional—but they're often tasked with deliv-

ering bad news or confronting a pet owner about their wrongdoing. This can lead to conflicts, and as precautions, ACOs are equipped with bite sticks, work gloves, and bulletproof vests.

The volunteer reserves don't have law enforcement training beyond the basic training they've received as preparation for the reserve program, and the department's goal is to keep them out of dangerous situations. Reservists accompanying officers don't carry bite sticks or wear vests. Volunteers are issued a badge-shaped pin to wear, and while representing the department, they wear tan polo shirt uniforms adorned with an animal control patch and an additional patch on their sleeves identifying them as volunteers.

Childress says the most common causes of injuries among ACOs are bites from vicious or scared animals and attacks from disgruntled members of the public. But he notes that officers are taught to defuse such situations. "What we teach our officers and our reserve officers is that if a situation like that is escalating ... back out of it and call me or another deputy, and we'll take care of it."

An Evolving Role

While the reservists don't participate in certain animal control duties, that doesn't mean they'll be kept from all elements of investigations. In fact, Gojkovich says, she hopes that the ACRs' on-site role will expand. "What I'd like to see happen in the future is for the ACRs to help keep a scene secure when we serve a warrant," says Gojkovich. She hopes the reservists can also help by completing inventory logs of people entering investigation scenes and transporting animals in need of immediate care.

Experts disagree about the role of volunteers and non-law enforcement personnel at crime scenes, but Childress believes that ACRs with proper training can be helpful. "There are lots of logistical things that we could use them for after we provide the training," he says—for example, volunteers can help gather information for the professional ACOs.

The reservists have also been helping provide creature comforts for some especially needy animals. Officer Susie Maldonado is currently in charge of caring for two dozen seized dogs at an off-site location; the county is holding the dogs while they wait for their owners' trials to be completed. It's a hard environment for the animals, who can be there for anywhere from four months to two years. Maldonado works daily with the dogs, including a number of pit bulls seized during the 2007 dogfighting case. She has bonded with these dogs, several of whom were puppies when they were seized. "I'm a firm believer that you can't just maintain an animal and leave," she says. "You have to socialize them. I go out there and

The reservists have helped with the care and feeding of these court-held dogs. In fact, ACR Elaine Kaufmann says that the most rewarding aspect of her volunteer time has been "getting over my initial nervousness at working with the court-held pit bulls. I had never been around pits before, and this was a tough bunch for my first exposure. Getting to know them has been a wonderful, challenging, and amazing experience."

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In addition, Childress says the county will purchase land this summer for its own small shelter for animals involved in court cases. "When our shelter for court-held animals is built, [the reservists] would be a big part of running that shelter," he says.

Going the Distance

While reservist responsibilities are still being fine-tuned, one major duty ACRs have been helping with is distribution and collection of animal traps. In such a far-flung county with numerous dogs and cats wandering loose, members of the public regularly call the department for animal traps to be delivered and picked up. In 2007, there were 420 calls for traps in Doña Ana County.

Doña Ana's animal control trucks are air-conditioned and were designed with the animals' comfort in mind, but the vehicles' many compartments leave

ACR and herpetologist Frank Bryce served as one of the trainers during the class for new volunteers. He explained how to identify snakes and catch them safely, using this prairie rattlesnake as an example of a poisonous snake.



little room to transport unwieldy cages. In the past, this often meant that each call for a trap required an ACO to make three or more trips—one to drop off the trap, a second to pick up the animal, and a third to pick up the trap. Considering the size of the county, a trap-trip from Las Cruces north to Hatch or south to Santa Teresa can take many valuable hours—hours that the ACOs don't have to spare.

Currently, only the professional ACOs pick up trapped animals. Officers are available to pick them up from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week; they are called by dispatch when an animal has been trapped, and respond as quickly as possible once their priority calls have been cleared. But with help from the ACRs, trap delivery and retrieval has become less of a tax on the department. On one day, reservists Hoeksema and Bryce retrieved seven traps, which were immediately and gratefully grabbed by ACOs heading into the field.

Trap delivery and retrieval is "probably one of the more valuable uses of the reserves," says Hoeksema. "It's not possible for the ACOs to do a conscientious job of picking up the traps all over the county. It's better service to the citizens, too, if these traps are moving around, because there's such a call for them. There's only a discrete number of them available."

Riding along with an officer can be a rewarding experience. During what had been a rather quiet shift, Zahler and ACO MaryLou Ward received a call about a horse tied without water in an alfalfa field. The animal did not belong to the property owner, and he wanted

her removed. The mare's ribs were pronounced, and she was suffering from diarrhea after munching too much of the young alfalfa crop. After a long night that included obtaining a warrant for the removal of the horse, the mare was brought to reservist Peggy Mirimanian, who fosters equines. After less than a week of Mirimanian's one-on-one TLC, the mare she calls Tina was looking healthier and was ready to join the rest of her herd.

Other reserve duties don't involve any contact with the public or with animals, but are still important. For example, ACR Kaufmann heard ACO Paul Richardson mention that the department's forms needed updating. Kaufmann, who works as an editor at New Mexico State University, connected with Norma Palomino, an NMSU student recommended by her professor, to get help designing the new forms. Kaufmann set up a meeting to facilitate exchange of information and acted as an intermediary to oversee the forms while they were in development.

The reservists also helped the county obtain a disaster-relief vehicle for animals. They assisted in developing the specifications for a 33-foot motor home to respond to natural disasters, like the flooding that hit the Hatch community in 2006. It can also be used for outreach, mobile adoptions, and spay/neuter services in remote areas.

Reservists also monitor court cases involving animals, conduct on-site inspections for multiple-animal permits, and serve as assistants to the animal control officers.

Educating the Public

But perhaps the greatest role the ACRs will play is that of public educators. ACO Richardson, who is drafting revisions of county animal ordinances, says there has been a cultural change of thinking about animals. It used to be perfectly acceptable, he says, for dogs to wander the neighborhood or be tied up in the yard—but now many communities are beginning to see these practices as inhumane or unsafe. Unfortunately, old habits die hard, and both of these practices are still common in the county. The ACOs and ACRs hope to expand their efforts to educate the public about the need to provide their animals with safe shelter, spaying and neutering, and vaccinations.

Maldonado, who was a veterinary technician for 14 years before she became an officer, says lack of education is the biggest issue. Some people, she says, "don't know what neglect is. They tend to think that it is OK to get a dog, put it in the backyard, throw food at it, and see it for two minutes a day."

The reservists, says Maldonado, can help by doing things the officers don't have time for. The volunteers can "go to events and pass brochures out, talk to the

public, talk to schools, and talk to radio stations for us," freeing up officers to deal with "bigger priorities, like a snake in the house or a vicious animal biting a child."

The volunteers bring a vast range of knowledge and skills to their work—skills that will help them in their role as educators. The current crop of reservists is a motley crew of retired professors, an editor, a retired engineer, a pharmacist, a herpetologist and operator of a popular dog and cat kennel, a retired teacher, a veterinary assistant, a veterinary technician, a horse breeder, and a horse trainer.

Pharmacist Susan Alderman volunteers because, she says, "animal control is the link between the community and the shelter." She is concerned about people's lack of knowledge about how to care for their animals, what to do when they are sick, and what happens when they are picked up by animal control. "They aren't doing [bad] things on purpose," she says. "They just don't know."

Kaufmann says she hopes to be part of the outreach effort that communicates what animal control does and why it's important. "Animal control is law and order, it is true; but in the words of Wendell Phillips, 'Law is nothing unless close behind it stands a warm, living public opinion,'" Kaufmann says. "I want to foster that warm, living public opinion so that the laws for animals are respected, followed, and those who don't follow them are prosecuted to the full extent of the law in front of judges who understand and respect animal protection."

Creating a Bond

Integrating the volunteers into the group of ACOs hasn't been easy. When the program was kicked off, Childress hadn't been hired, and the department did not yet have a director to oversee the program. In addition, years of problems at the local shelter—including conflicts over euthanasia rates and a long-term struggle to keep a qualified director—prompted animal advocates, including some of the folks now volunteering as ACRs, to try to force improvements through public criticism of the shelter. The ACOs had concerns that these advocates might also publicize any perceived problems with the animal control department, undermining the work the reserve program was designed to support. And the reservists needed time to see that the officers were acting in the best interests of the animals.

Childress and Zahler admit it was rocky at first, but relations have improved as the two groups have spent more time working together. "The ACOs are beginning to see we are helpful," says Zahler. "At first they didn't trust us. They are a close-knit family."

Childress says the ACOs are seeing that the ACRs don't have hidden agendas. He's invited the ACRs to at-

tend weekly staff meetings, and they were included in the celebration of Animal Control Officer Appreciation Week, receiving accolades and certificates of appreciation at the county commission meeting.

Developing the program and organizing the reservists' duties and hours has been a job in itself. ACRs are asked to volunteer eight hours a month, but many put in more, and volunteer coordinator Zahler admits that she's stopped keeping track of the number of hours she has worked. In fact, Zahler is so much a part of the department, Childress laughs, that she has a key to the building and her own office. "She has a county e-mail address, and it's not unusual to come in and have a note on my chair from her," he says.

Garrison is also enthusiastic about Zahler's energy level. "She's a ball of fire," he says. "I have all the respect in the world for her."

The three are enthusiastic about the program and eager to offer their support to communities interested in starting a similar one. The volunteers have "already proven themselves to be hard-working, with lots of heart and desire," Childress says, adding that the program "couldn't be anything but a benefit." A policies and procedures manual for the volunteers has been developed and is available for reference at animalsheltering.org/dona-ana-ACRs.

A love for animals ties the ACOs and ACRs of Doña Ana County together. With the drive and determination both groups display, they will be a formidable team. "The whole purpose of this is to benefit the animals," Zahler says. "Hopefully we can do something to improve their lives." **AS**

Freelance writer Cheryl Fallstead lives in Las Cruces, N.M., and wrote this story while her shelter dogs, Schotzie and Sullivan, slept in her office without complaint or interruption—except for the necessary breaks for petting, playtime, and walk-in-the-desert moments.

Contacts

You may contact the leaders of this program for their assistance.

Sheriff Todd Garrison: (575) 525-8835

Animal control and codes director
Curtiss Childress: (575) 525-8857

Animal control reserve volunteer coordinator
Maryln Zahler: (575) 647-1477