

POLICIES

Should Your Shelter Accept Convicted Animal Abusers for Community-Service Work?

Unless your shelter has the staffing and policies in place to do it right, you should say “no” to this controversial approach to rehabilitation.

By Cynthia Stitely

In May 1994 in Mobile, Alabama, a group of teenagers attempted to hang a puppy and burn him alive. A few months later, they were found guilty of cruelty to animals in connection with the abuse.

The presiding judge sentenced one of the young men, a juvenile named “Greg,” to perform 200 hours of community service for the Mobile SPCA. Greg became the first person convicted of a crime against animals that the SPCA, which does not operate a shelter, accepted for community service.

SPCA staff contacted the county shelter, which agreed to allow Greg to spend some of his hours at its facility. SPCA staff then developed a plan with Greg’s case worker to provide Greg with a positive experience, one that might deter him from acting violently again. Before he started working, SPCA staff met with Greg and his parents to make sure everyone had a clear understanding of what he would be doing.

Greg worked in many different capacities at the shelter, always supervised by a staff member when in animal-holding areas. Whenever possible, he was matched with staff “role models” who could best show him positive human-animal interactions. (Because the incident of abuse had enraged the community, his identity as one of the abusers was only revealed to other staff on a need-to-know basis.) Greg’s supervi-

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Some shelter administrators point to the promises of community-service work at shelters for convicted animal abusers. Other administrators point to the pitfalls.

sors submitted weekly reports on his performance and said they were satisfied with his work.

A Controversial Practice

According to Mobile SPCA president Joan Richardson, the experience was a positive one. And anecdotal evidence suggests that, based in part on stories like Greg's, increasing numbers of judges are sentencing convicted animal abusers to perform community-service work at animal shelters.

But is court-ordered community-service work at shelters for individuals convicted of animal abuse a good thing? Given the complex psychological factors that lead to animal cruelty, does it change abusers' behavior? In other words, can someone like Greg, who spends a few weeks at a shelter, develop the foundation for a humane ethic? And most importantly for humane agencies, should shelters devote scarce re-

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sources to such programs? Views in the animal-sheltering community range from strong opposition to cautious optimism.

Some find sentencing an animal abuser to community-service work in a shelter akin to sentencing a rapist to work in a rape crisis center. "I would not trust them to be alone with

any animal," said Marilyn Cunningham, head supervisor of the Southwest Missouri Humane Society, after two men convicted of brutally killing a puppy were sentenced to work at her Webster County facility. "And I don't feel the hundred hours [of community service] would change their perception of the value of a life." Upon hearing the court's sentence, the Southwest Missouri Humane Society refused to allow the men to work their hours at the shelter.

While Cunningham and others oppose this type of sentence on principle alone, others base their opposition on prior negative experiences. Sally Fekety, HSUS senior associate for animal care and sheltering, recalls that a staff member at her former shelter once walked in on a community-service worker kicking a shelter puppy. (The worker had been convicted of an offense that was not related to animals.) Phil Snyder, director of HSUS's Central States Re-

SENDING ANIMAL-LAW VIOLATORS TO THE CLASSROOM

Another type of sentencing for those who break animal-related laws is to send the offenders "back to school." Animal-control law violators' courses, based largely on court-mandated classes for those convicted of alcohol-related driving violations, are designed to teach offenders why their actions are harmful and how the offenders can avoid future convictions through proper animal care and control. Most courses are for people who break animal-control laws, not animal-cruelty laws.

In 1983, the Sonoma County (Calif.) Animal Regulation Division began its Animal Control Law Violator's School. Because the number of animal-law violations fell significantly (from about 40 per month in 1983 to about 10 per month a decade later), the agency stopped offering the class in 1993. Over those ten years, more than 2,000 people attended the class, which included information about the role of animal control in the community, animal-welfare regulations, and responsible pet ownership.

Similar classes are still being held in several other jurisdictions, including Midland, Texas. In this program, a first offender whose dog was impounded for running loose could pay the \$10 registration fee for the class instead of the \$40 impoundment fee. Violators must sign up for the class at municipal court and have 90 days to attend one of the biweekly sessions.

Officers who teach the course, which focuses on responsible pet ownership, say the course could be completed in one hour but that students' questions often extend it up to 2½ hours. Since the program began, the rate of repeat offenders has dropped from 22



percent to less than 5 percent. Midland Animal Control also offers a seminar on how to start such a program.

Once a month, Dallas Animal Control holds classes for those cited for animal-control law violations. Developed five years ago, the course uses handouts and videos to teach about responsible pet ownership, animal overpopulation, and animal control. It also includes a discussion period during which students can ask questions about their own pets' behavior problems. The program attracts 15-20 students per class, and participants are allowed to have one citation per two-year period dismissed. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Barry Evans, Chief Deputy, Sonoma County Animal Regulation Division, 1247 Century Court, Santa Rosa, CA 95403; 707-524-7100.

Karen Hoffman, Midland Animal Control, 1200 N. Fairgrounds Road, Midland, TX 79706; 915-685-7422.

Molly Malone, Dallas Animal Control, 8414 Forney Road, Dallas, TX 75227; 214-670-7430.



Photos courtesy of the Kentucky Humane Society

Reform Versus Retribution

To what degree community-service work can change abusers' behavior will remain a matter of debate. But perhaps most germane to animal helpers is Healey's qualification—that community service is work if the person can



change the offenders' behavior toward animals. Judges in the other camp, however, seek retribution. This was the obvious perspective of the presiding judge in the Webster County, Missouri, case: "[Because] the crime involved animals," the judge said, "[those convicted] should have to take care of animals as part of their punishment." He went on to explain that offenders must do whatever the service site wants them to do, many times the "most disgusting job" (in his view) such as cleaning kennels or shoveling feces.

Unfortunately, this attitude could lead to further problems. "Simply using a job at a shelter as punishment

gional Office, recalls other problems with community-service workers during his years running shelters: Some came to work intoxicated. Others harassed and stalked female employees.

Proponents, however, see this type of sentencing as an opportunity to reform and educate offenders and possibly prevent future acts of cruelty. They point to experiences like Greg's at the Mobile SPCA as examples of how the community service concept should work.

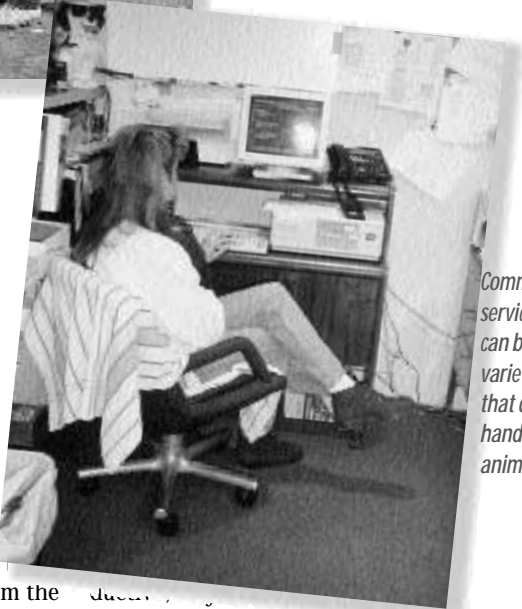
Belinda Lewis, director of the Fort Wayne (Ind.) Department of Animal Care and Control, felt that her agency had a positive influence on "Carl," a teenager who beat a dog with a tire iron, dragged him behind a car, and left him in a ditch. Carl was convicted of animal cruelty, and Lewis agreed to a carefully-developed program of community-service work for Carl. "It was extremely successful," Lewis says. "We had no doubt at the end of the interaction time that we would never see this individual in an animal cruelty situation again."

Mary Healey, executive director of the Washington (D.C.) Humane Society, sees the same potential. "It can be an educational experience if the person can be under the proper supervision," she says.

be given proper supervision. As the Mobile SPCA's experience with Greg suggests, accepting a convicted abuser to work at your shelter is an extremely staff- and time-intensive undertaking.

Snyder believes that such sentences put too much of a burden on shelters, which must both ensure that abusers are constantly supervised and soothe the feelings of staff who probably don't want them there. "A shelter should not be responsible for taking people aside and showing them the value of animal life," he says. "The shelter's main focus must be on the animals and the protection of those animals."

Judges, of course, often feel differently, in part because they usually know little about either animal issues or most shelters' staffing shortages. When it comes to sentencing offenders to community service, judges seem to fall into one of two camps: The more reformist among them view community-service work at a shelter as an educational opportunity, one that can potentially help



Community-service workers can be assigned a variety of tasks that do not entail hands-on contact with animals.

Lockwood, vice president of... initiatives with The HSUS. "It is only going to increase whatever hostility the offender already has toward animals." Resentment, not reform, may be the unintended result.

Even when judges view education as the objective, sending an abuser to work at a shelter still may not be an appropriate decision for the particular individual. Last August, for example, a judge in Lewiston, Maine, sentenced an animal collector to either take an animal-care course or perform community ser-

vice at the local SPCA. The judge apparently felt that working in a shelter would teach the man proper animal care. But in reality, because collectors are typically staunchly opposed to euthanasia, working in an animal shelter would have done little more than feed the man's propensity to "save" the animals.

Service for Other Offenders

For animal shelters, then, a successful community-service program for convicted animal abusers requires not only adequate resources, but also

appropriate acceptance policies (see the sidebar below). Those are two big reasons why some shelter administrators have chosen to accept only individuals who committed crimes that were not violent, sex-related, drug-related, or animal-related.

The Kentucky Humane Society (KHS) is one such organization. KHS works with two different community-service programs that place persons living in halfway houses with agencies and organizations in Louisville, Kentucky. According to

Development Director Jackie Gulbe, KHS has given workers such tasks as kennel work, basic maintenance, data entry, and reception. "They've been a godsend," says Gulbe, who says the workers have augmented the jobs of volunteers.

Even this kind of community-service program, however, can be risky without appropriate supervision and guidance from managers and staff. As with any shelter program, a community-service program requires forethought and advance planning. ■

BEFORE YOUR SHELTER ACCEPTS COMMUNITY-SERVICE WORKERS...

Both public and private animal shelters generally have the right to decide whether or not to accept offenders for community-service work in their facilities. The HSUS recommends that animal shelters exercise that right by refusing to participate in court-ordered community-service programs unless their facilities are appropriately staffed and otherwise prepared. Before your shelter decides to accept convicted animal abusers for community-service work, The HSUS's Randy Lockwood recommends you take the following actions:

- Assess your staffing. Does your shelter have enough staff to properly supervise individuals? Constant supervision is an absolute necessity, even for workers who will not be permitted to handle animals. Otherwise, your shelter is not taking adequate steps to protect the animals in its care.
- Establish a cooperative relationship with the court system. Not only will this help you avoid any surprise community-service assignments by judges, but it will also foster communication essential to a successful community-service program. Shelter administrators should tell judges and prosecutors that court-mandated community-service work in shelters is appropriate only when reform, not punishment, is the goal. Shelters should also work to educate judges about the roots of animal cruelty and the link between cruelty to animals and violence toward humans.
- Establish acceptance guidelines. Base acceptance on the types of crimes and/or numbers of convictions. For example, no shelter should accept anyone convicted of a drug-related crime because of the individual's potential behavior problems and the access he would have to veterinary drugs, needles, and syringes at the shelter. Similarly, no shelter should accept anyone convicted of burglary, sex-related crimes, or multiple crimes.

If your shelter decides to accept convicted animal offenders to perform their community-service hours at your site, take the following additional steps for each particular case:

- Review each case individually. Can your agency help this person? Is the nature of the crime so heinous, or the abuser's attitude toward authority so negative, that to sentence him to community-service work would likely lead to disaster?
- Meet with the offender and the judge. Discuss what the convict will do at the shelter, the shelter's responsibilities, and other relevant details. If the offender is a juvenile, also include his case worker and guardians when developing the plan.
- Prepare a task-plan. The plan should include the exact tasks to be assigned to the offender, his work schedule, and staff roles and responsibilities.
- Focus on quality of service rather than quantity. The quality of the projects given the offender is more important than the number of hours served.

Above all, keep in mind that community service is not a project to be taken on without serious planning and communication with the court system.