

Field Trip

BY KATINA ANTONIADES

Washington, D.C.

The organization: Washington Animal Rescue League

Website: warl.org

Year established: 1914

Resources: About 80 staff and 600 volunteers

If you renovate it, they will come: Since significantly revamping its circa-1970 facility from 2004 to 2006, the Washington Animal Rescue League has opened its doors to visitors from all over the United States and from other countries, too. The organization gives six or seven tours each month to animal care professionals who are curious about the facility, says executive director Gary Weitzman, D.V.M., M.P.H., who worked as the organization's medical director during the renovation. The building's redesign was the brainchild of the organization's former executive director, Scotlund Haisley, now director of Emergency Services for The Humane Society of the United States.

Weitzman describes what visitors—and the resident animals—experience: dog and cat enclosures constructed of glass and nonporous, easy-to-clean Corian; housing that offers animals both companionship and privacy; and a quiet, relaxed atmosphere in which water running over glass surfaces creates soothing white noise. Calming music is played, and skylights allow natural light to stream in. Weitzman appreciates the extra traffic the tours bring. "It's a very special environment, and it's one that we don't want to hide here," he says. "We want it to be translated to other shelters that are either in the process of renovating or building from scratch."

Two organizations, one goal: The League, which is limited admission, began a close partnership in 2008 with the Washington Humane Society (WHS), which runs its own open-admission shelter, enforces the anti-cruelty code, and operates the District's animal control services and high-volume



A temporary resident at the Washington Animal Rescue League looks out through a glass divider in one of the shelter's puppy dens.

shelter. Every week, the League transfers in WHS animals for adoption—about 30 cats and 15 dogs a month—in order to help its D.C. neighbor. The League's medical center also provides treatment for WHS animals, and the humane education departments of the two organizations collaborate to better reach the District's youth. A true, two-way partnership, Weitzman says the relationship is long overdue. "It's really great working together," he says. "It's really the model that all humane groups ought to be using now."

Animals from near and far: Animals from other shelters make up an unusually large proportion of the League's animal intake—about 90 percent. The organization has also taken animals from natural disaster situations and puppy mill busts. In 2008, those animals included pets left homeless from the severe Iowa floods as well as puppy mill rescues in Virginia, Tennessee, and Quebec. "We could potentially have the luxury of just selecting animals that would be easy to deal with, but it's not what we want," says Weitzman. "We want to have animals that we can ultimately get into homes ... and we all know that there are certain animals that can't—but we definitely want to be able to help other shelters."

Providing a service: The League's medical center, which opened in 1996 and cares for almost 7,000 dogs and cats each year, provides services for other organizations as well as the community's pet owners. The staff includes six full- and part-time veterinarians. Each month, the hospital holds a clinic offering low-cost vaccinations and microchips for local residents' pets.



Windows and skylights fill the League's facility with sunlight, while water running over glass surfaces creates soothing white noise.

The center gets a lot of use, especially when tending to the animals transferred from other shelters, many of whom need medical care, says Weitzman. The cost of all that activity adds up quickly. "One of the hardest things for us is paying for our hospital, and it costs us about a million dollars a year to keep it open," he says. "That's a huge challenge—I mean, how do you fund that? Especially because the economy's not great right now. So it's not a great time to have to fund a million-dollar loss, but [operating our medical center is] one of the central tenets of our mission."

Orange dogs, green cats: Since March, the League's adoption staff has been using the ASPCA's Meet Your Match program, which makes careful adoption matches by evaluating and categorizing individual animals and adopters. Weitzman is happy with the program and the results it has produced so far. "First of all, it's fun, because it's really colorful, and it's appealing, but it's also helped lead people to animals that they might not have noticed before," he says. "I definitely think we've had an increase in adoption in some of the animals that might have been missed otherwise."