

They Fought for the Law—and They Won

New legislation in New Mexico addresses shelter standards and euthanasia licensing

BY KATINA ANTONIADES

Last year, Animal Protection of New Mexico (APNM), a non-profit advocacy organization based in Albuquerque, got an alarming call from a landfill: An employee had opened a bag from a local shelter to find a live Doberman inside.

The shelter's staff were "horrified" when they heard the news, says Heather Greenhood, APNM's legislative director. "They would have never wanted to do that," she says. "But the sad reality was that animal control officers were hired and then handed a syringe and [told], 'Good luck to ya.'"

Those officers and many of their colleagues around the state want more training—something APNM has tried to provide. The group has devoted \$100,000 to helping New Mexico shelters over the last few years; some of the money has paid for training workshops conducted by the National Animal Control Association and other organizations. "But we realized that we shouldn't be spending \$100,000 of our nonprofit money," says Greenhood. "The state should."

This summer, that goal came much closer to becoming a reality. It took four years to accomplish, but a coalition of animal control representatives, private shelter employees, government officials, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and activists helped pass the Animal Sheltering Services Act. Sponsored by state Sen. Mary Jane Garcia, the bill was signed into law by Gov. Bill Richardson in March and went into effect July 1.

Before the bill's passage, research conducted by APNM revealed that 17 states regulated and licensed shelters, and 28 states addressed euthanasia in their statutes. New Mexico wasn't one of them. "New Mexico had no infrastructure in place to ensure humane conditions for animals at municipal shelters

and also had no training or other requirements for those performing euthanasia at shelters," says Greenhood.

And those in the trenches were seeking guidance. "For years, the public shelter administrations and municipal governments have been looking for assistance in determining standards for their facilities," says Greenhood.

The new legislation calls for the creation of an "animal sheltering services board" that will establish state standards for shelters, determine licensing rules and issue licenses for technicians and shelters that perform euthanasia, and create certification procedures for euthanasia instructors. The shelter standards are voluntary, while the euthanasia-related regulations are mandatory. The law also allows for the creation of an "animal care and facility fund" in the state treasury that will be supplied by appropriations from the state legislature, grants, fees, private donations, and other sources.

The nine-member board will include a shelter employee trained in euthanasia; a shelter director trained in animal shelter standards; a veterinarian who works with a shelter; a member of the public; a breeder; and representatives from a rescue group, an animal advocacy group, the state association of counties, and the state municipal league.

One nominee is Andrew Jaramillo, president of the New Mexico Animal Control Association and animal control supervisor for Santa Fe County. "I'm all for it," says Jaramillo, who helped lobby for the bill. "We pushed for it, and we support it, and I think it's the best thing."

Another animal control employee who hopes the new standards will help him address issues within his facility made a two-hour round-trip drive from Albuquerque to Santa Fe to testify in favor of the bill, says Greenhood. The new standards will protect his agency, too. In some cases, citizens who've disagreed with shelters' procedures have sued them; if that happens to a shelter following implementation of the new standards, the organization could explain that they're voluntarily complying with state guidelines.

Determining the makeup of the board charged with creating those guidelines created "quite a bit of conversation," says Pamela Herndon, deputy superintendent of the regulation and licensing department, which oversees state boards and commissions. "People wanted to make sure that there was ... a broad spectrum."

Misunderstandings of the proposed law prompted concern among staff at small shelters who worried that following the new standards would prove too costly. "The purpose of this legislation was actually to help them—to help them set the standards and to administer to the animals just like they wanted to," says Herndon. "After much discussion, I think ... people could see that." And some breeders and members of the state livestock board were apprehensive until they understood that they were not the focus of the legislation, she says.

The success of the animal shelter services bill shows that New Mexicans care about humane issues, Greenhood says—and that their legislators are listening. **AS**