

Field Trip

BY LESLIE SMITH

San Francisco, California

The organization: Give a Dog a Bone

Year established: 1999

Website: gadab.org

Resources: One founding member/primary dog handler, 12 volunteers

The mission: Each year, 300 to 400 dogs wind up in municipal protective custody at San Francisco Animal Care and Control (SF/ACC) because their registered owners have been charged with animal cruelty, evicted, hospitalized, or incarcerated. Corinne Dowling, a volunteer with SF/ACC, started Give a Dog a Bone with the goal of improving the quality of life for dogs in protective city custody.

It's a dog's life: Before the program existed, custody dogs at SF/ACC spent long hours (and sometimes months on end) in tiny kennels without so much as a walk or a scratch behind the ears. For both legal and safety reasons, the usual volunteers at the shelter are not allowed to spend time with them. Give a Dog a Bone volunteers are only allowed access to the animals after undergoing a series of intensive training sessions in which they learn the safety and handling skills required for dealing with fearful and distressed dogs.

Many of these dogs arrive in custody emaciated or bearing the scars of severe mistreatment. Dowling knows the last thing they need is more trauma. Her program provides the mental and physical stimulation and emotional care so crucial to their well-being. "Before Give a Dog a Bone, some of our custody dogs literally went cage crazy. There was no one to visit them, let alone take them out for walks," says Bing Dilts, D.V.M., veterinarian at SF/ACC. "Thanks to Corinne's program, the stress level is now much lower."



Corinne Dowling of Give a Dog a Bone sweet talks a kenneled pooch. MARK ROGERS PHOTOGRAPHY

Teaching an old dog new tricks: Dowling and her volunteers take dogs one at a time to the fenced yard on shelter property, where they can play fetch, sniff the greenery, or simply relieve themselves in an area away from where they eat and sleep. "It's the one time of the day they can run around outside and just enjoy being a dog," Dowling says. Pooch etiquette, agility training, socialization, and other activities are incorporated in the program too, depending on the dogs' interests and needs.

Unfortunately, some dogs have been so badly abused that they're distrustful of humans and considered dangerous. Though these dogs aren't allowed out of their kennels, Dowling has devised a host of activities to encourage stretching and movement within confined space, and she uses games and clicker training to keep their minds active. To help renew and foster their trust in humans, she offers plenty of praise, affection, and companionship. And the dogs respond: Sasha, a 4-year-old pit bull mix, was so shut down she barely lifted her head during her first few weeks in the shelter. But after dozens of sessions with volunteers, she began to come to life again, even prancing up to the front of her kennel to give kisses to her favorite visitors.

The program has been so successful that Animal Farm Foundation and PetSmart Charities awarded Give a Dog a Bone a grant to create an instructional

film and manual, hoping that shelters around the country will be able to replicate the program (materials will be available at the group's website). "It's easily implemented, no matter how strapped for resources an agency is," Dowling says.

A bone to pick: It's challenging to keep dogs kenneled for long stretches from deteriorating. "Even with the environmental enrichment we provide, no dog should have to spend even part of his or her life in a setting that is so species-inappropriate," Dowling says. And while quality of life for the dogs is her primary concern, she admits that keeping the program alive and well can also be taxing. "It's not expensive," she says, "but it's one heck of a struggle sometimes. I'm constantly looking for skilled volunteers for everything from dog handling to office administration."

Something to wag about: Thanks to Give a Dog a Bone, more of SF/ACC's custody dogs are faring better during their stay at the shelter. In fact, the adoption rate for former custody dogs reached a record high of 31 percent in 2007—an impressive number considering the negative effect long-term kenneling is known to have on behavior. "All we can do is do right by our animals while they're here," says Carl Friedman, executive director of SF/ACC. "The difference this program makes in the lives of the neediest of the needy ... it almost brings one to tears."