

Fired worker crusades for reform at San Bernardino city animal shelter

SAN BERNARDINO: Even the city facility's director agrees and says "we just don't do a very good job."

By JANET ZIMMERMAN
The Press-Enterprise

Dog lover Lori Routh was troubled by the sick pups and poor conditions she witnessed at the San Bernardino city animal shelter where she worked.

As a volunteer, then employee, she often used her own money for dog food when supplies ran low. Routh endured the stench of feces trapped in decaying drains and fretted over the lack of medical care for dogs.

Still, for almost two years, she told herself she was making a difference.

But her tolerance ended on a rainy night last winter, when water seeped through the roof at the aging city shelter. Blankets she put down in the kennels were quickly sodden. Wet dogs shivered from the cold.

On that chilly night, Routh snapped pictures of rusted swamp coolers, a collapsed ceiling over cages in the receiving room and broken pulleys on kennel doors jury-rigged with wire and leashes.

She posted her complaints and photos on an Internet chat room in late November. The move triggered a public outcry for improvements to the 50-year-old shelter.

It also got her banned from the premises.

"Some people told me posting images and talking about the way things are run there turned the public against animal control. I'd like to think it's speeding things up, improving things," said Routh, 32.

Since her departure, Routh's complaint to California's Occupational Safety and Health Administration prompted repairs to the collapsed ceiling and part of the roof. She and members of her Coalition for Shelter Pets have met with several San Bernardino City Council members to lobby for change. The council members have encouraged her, she said, but have taken no action.

The most serious problems — staff shortages, overcrowding, rampant disease and a crumbling facility — remain. They are issues that cannot be resolved without a massive infusion of money, city officials and critics agree.

'One Dog at a Time'

With her strawberry blonde bob and freckles, Routh comes off as friendly and unassuming. She is passionate and persuasive, not pushy. From her Crestline home, she networks with others on the Internet to save pets from being euthanized.

“She’s trying to save the world, one dog at a time, that one,” said Kelly Anderson, of Huntington Beach, who adopted a pit-bull mix rescued from the San Bernardino shelter and is part of Routh’s 15-member coalition.

Routh volunteered at the San Bernardino city shelter after she left a career in firefighting in 2005. She then took a \$13-an-hour shelter attendant job cleaning kennels, conducting adoption interviews and euthanizing animals.

After eight months, she moved to the Rancho Cucamonga shelter because it paid \$17 an hour and she didn’t have to euthanize any animals. But she continued to volunteer at San Bernardino.

“It was like my second home. It was where I felt comfortable,” said Routh, now in school to become a radiology technician. “It was like an inner peace I’d never felt before.”

Ken Childress, director of San Bernardino’s Animal Control Department, called Routh well-meaning and a great employee. But she is obsessive-compulsive about animals and dissatisfied with the slow pace of improvements, he said.

“I think she’s extremely frustrated that the city hasn’t stepped to the plate and resolved the issues that are here. These are issues that every shelter in the United States faces. Some places are doing a better job at it than others,” Childress said.

And where does San Bernardino rank among them?

“At the bottom of the pile,” he said.

While volunteering, Routh took some risks, including solitary nighttime visits and letting the quarantined pit bulls off-leash, Childress said. The final straw was when public discussions prompted by her Internet posting turned “hostile and nasty” and further damaged morale at the shelter, he said.

Even though Routh tried to keep the discussion focused on the facility, blame ultimately fell on the employees, he said.

“That’s who ends up paying the price for it,” said Childress, explaining why Routh was let go in December. “We weren’t trying to be vindictive or cover anything up, but you gotta work with what you have and try to stay together.”

'The Best We Can Do'

Childress is candid about problems at the shelter.

“Given the current level of animals we handle and the current budget, we just don’t do a very good job,” he said.

Childress said he alerted his boss, City Manager Fred Wilson, and the mayor to the issues.

But Wilson said he was unaware of the complaints and called the facilities adequate.

“The city is not in a position at all to put money into it,” he said. “It’s the best we can do.”

When Childress came to San Bernardino from the Memphis shelter in 2003, he was surprised to find that of the 25 employees in animal control, only five were shelter attendants. A facility that handles 250 animals on a given day should have at least 12 attendants, he said.

The workers hurry to hose out kennels before the 10 a.m. opening of the shelter and don’t have time to go back during the day to tend the animals, he said.

The facility shelters three times the number of animals it was built for, he said. Routh and others complain that the crowding forces incompatible dogs together in kennels and leads to fights.

Crowding also contributes to widespread outbreaks of fatal diseases such as parvovirus and distemper, largely because there is no place to quarantine sick animals and new arrivals, they said. Only puppies are vaccinated, but they are quickly exposed to illness because they can’t be isolated while the shots take affect.

Some rescue groups are leery of pulling dogs from the shelter.

Cheryl Weatherford of Passion for Paws, a La Jolla-based Akita rescue, said she lost a San Bernardino shelter dog last year because he wasn’t vaccinated. She had offered to take the dog shortly after he arrived but shelter staff thought he would be adopted quickly.

About a week later, the shelter called her to take the animal because he had diarrhea, and she started him on medication and force feedings, Weatherford said. The dog died three days later.

A necropsy showed he died of parvovirus, which, based on the incubation period, he clearly contracted at the shelter, Weatherford said.

“All they had to do was give him a \$6 shot and save his life,” Weatherford said. “He died a needless and painful death.”

The shelter has a registered veterinary technician on site but not enough staff or money to provide ongoing medical treatment, Childress said. About 10 percent of the animals suffer from

such illnesses as kennel cough, distemper and parvovirus, and some rescue organizations pull animals that are already sick, he said.

Childress said improvements on his watch included remodeling of the cat house, where felines once crawled amid the insulation in the walls and ceiling; passage of the city's mandatory spay and neuter law for dogs; renovation of the shelter's lobby; and the addition of a used trailer where volunteers can gather.

High Euthanasia Rate

San Bernardino provides animal control and shelter services for the cities of Fontana and Loma Linda, and houses animals for Colton and Grand Terrace. The situation would be worse without the approximately \$1 million in revenue those contracts bring in, Childress said.

The shelter's budget for the current fiscal year is \$500,000, plus \$1.4 million in revenue from the contracts, licensing, fines and adoptions, most of which goes toward personnel and animal control.

Because of space and staff shortages, the San Bernardino shelter has among the highest euthanasia rates in the region — 69 percent of the 15,532 dogs and cats received in 2007, Childress and Routh said.

By comparison, the San Bernardino County shelter in Devore euthanized 61 percent of the 12,047 dogs and cats it took in last year; Rancho Cucamonga Animal Care and Services Department, which strives to be a no-kill shelter, has a euthanasia rate of 21 percent.

“We don't have funds to continue treatment,” Childress said. “It's often euthanasia.”

The city has long neglected the shelter, even during more prosperous economic times, said San Bernardino Humane Society President Sue Dawson, who serves on the city's Animal Control Commission.

Her group began calling attention to the problem in the 1970s and '80s and now concentrates efforts to keep animals out of the shelter.

“I wished (Routh) the best of luck, because we didn't succeed, but I'm hoping she does,” Dawson said. “The sad part is, the city has ignored this for so long ... I have no reason to think they're going to be doing anything.”

Reach Janet Zimmerman at 951-368-9586 or jzimmerman@PE.com