



>>

News — Dog Day Afternoon

It's time to put animal control into the hands of the law.



caption: caption: Cage match: Scores of dogs wait for permanent homes at shelters (Photo by Jesse Lundy).

photo/art credit: jesse lundy

webhead: Dog Day Afternoon

Dog Day Afternoon

It's time to put animal control into the hands of the law.

By Tara Murtha tmurtha@philadelphiaweekly.com

Philadelphia's turned yet another page in our gruesome ongoing struggle for humane animal control.

Late Monday, the Philadelphia Animal Care and Control Association (PACCA) lost the contract for animal control when the city awarded it to the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PSPCA) after unexpectedly posting a Request for Proposal (RFP) that solicited bids right after renewing the existing contract with PACCA (and in the middle of the fiscal year). The PSPCA handled animal control in Philadelphia until they relinquished the contract in 2000 and stopped providing services in 2002. The change has left animal activists confused and more worried than ever about the future of Philly's animals.

A controversial figure in this drama is Howard Nelson, who joined the PSPCA as CEO in May 2007. In his previous post as executive director of Washington, D.C.'s Humane Society, Nelson introduced a "Good Home Guarantee" program that was touted as a no-kill initiative guaranteeing that no adoptable animals would be unnecessarily put down.

The truth is that about 70 percent of all intake animals were being euthanized under the program. The Washington Humane Society managed to claim a no-kill philosophy while euthanizing 70 percent of the animals by employing a very narrow definition of "adoptable."

For example, the Society's previous definition of "adoptable" excluded all pit bulls and pit-bull mixes (also not considered adoptable: cats with ear mites and animals with a host of minor conditions easily remedied with medicine).

In Philadelphia, this would be problematic. On a recent visit to the PACCA shelter, about 95 percent of the dogs housed there were pit bull mixes. Pit bulls commonly make up most of a shelter's canine population because that's what's left over after advocacy groups comb the intake population and funnel specific breeds into placement networks.

Nathan Winograd, a lawyer and national animal control expert, has routinely blasted the PSPCA's Howard Nelson in the past. Winograd is nonetheless cautiously optimistic about the PSPCA taking over the contract. (Nelson was unavailable for comment as of press time.)

"I've had major disagreements with Howard Nelson in the past. While I have expressed concern about historical PSPCA policies, Howard has assured me the policies of the past are no longer the current policies and that if PSPCA were to get the contract, he will honor that contract with the spirit of the programs that I have professed," says Winograd. "And he has assured me that he intends to seek and pass shelter reform legislation."

It's no secret that Philadelphia is considered a total disaster for animal control by animal rights activists and experts. Infighting, politics, nepotism, mismanagement and power struggles between PACCA and the PSPCA have all been obstacles in the way of implementing progressive no-kill programs of the sort effective in New York City and San Francisco.

Winograd, who literally wrote the book on no-kill shelter management, performed an in-depth audit of Philadelphia's services for the city in 2005 and has worked closely with both Howard Nelson and Tara Darby, executive director of PACCA.



Photo By Jesse Lundy

He says he used to think of PACCA, the city-created organization that just lost the contract, as "the lesser of two evils." Though it started out bogged down with employees left over from the "house of horrors" days when life was systematically cruel and grim for animals, PACCA has brought save rates up by almost 600 percent and implemented many lifesaving programs like foster care networks and adoption centers.

But then, in Winograd's perspective, PACCA hit a wall, and he watched the passion that ignited the turnaround in 2005 fizzle and fade.

Meanwhile, Howard Nelson began to communicate more regularly with Winograd, changing his

tune most dramatically, says Winograd, after the RFP hit the Web in September.

“I can’t tell you if he found the light, but over the last couple of months Howard Nelson has made an active effort to reach out to me and to try to assure me that those historical policies were just that—history ... I told him that’s great, but I’m not interested in promises. I’d like to see this have the force of law.”

Legislation would help clarify where good intentions can’t. Why spend energy currying hope within a two-party system when the two organizations ultimately suffer the same obstacles of bureaucracy, ego and politics? These are the problems that led to our grisly record in animal control; it was only a few years ago that there were reports of dogs killed within one minute of being dropped off at a shelter.

“Directors come and go. Directors burn out and lose heart and get sidetracked. So I’m less interested in who runs animal control and more interested in making sure that animal control is run rigorously, ethically and transparently,” Winograd said Monday, after the city announced the PSCPA’s appointment.

To that end, Winograd wrote the Companion Animal Protection Act (CAPA), guidelines that define “adoptable” and “unadoptable” animals in specific legal terms. For example, pit bulls that pass behavioral assessment are adoptable. So are cats with ear mites. And overweight poodles. Under these guidelines about 90 percent of intake animals would be spayed or neutered then put up for adoption or placed through existing networks. Only irremediably sick and suffering animals and animals with a history of vicious behavior would be euthanized.

CAPA includes additional check-and-balance provisions that must be followed before an animal is killed, including exhausting all adoption and shelter options, notifying the rescue community, and publishing a public monthly report.

PW has reviewed a copy of an email wherein Nelson asserts that he and the PSCPA will “support and comply with all components” of CAPA.

For the sake of the animals, let’s hope so.