



Humane Society ruffles feathers

Layoffs, limits on animal intake upset some animal advocates

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Faced with potential budget shortfalls, the Humane Society of Huron Valley has laid off several employees just a few months after tightening its rules on accepting out-of-county animals.

The actions have drawn criticism from the agency's volunteers and supporters who don't want any limits placed on the number of dogs and cats accepted at the shelter in Superior Township. They are also questioning why the board of directors hadn't talked about the organization's financial troubles when it first became aware of them.

Over the past week, some Humane Society supporters say they met several times or been in contact with board members looking for answers and ways they can help.

Board Treasurer Jody Glancy said that she alerted the board in September to a possible \$240,000 shortfall at the end of the year in the \$1.5 million in operating expenses.

At that time, Glancy said, the annual fund-raising campaign was falling behind and there were additional expenses at the shelter because of a dramatic rise in the number of animals being brought to the shelter from out of Washtenaw County.

According to Humane Society statistics, the number of cats and dogs that came from out of county dramatically jumped from 1,133 in 2003 to 3,223 in 2004, a 184 percent increase.

In response to the possible shortfall, the board created a policy in October to limit the intake of out-of-county dogs and cats.

By the end of the year, however, Glancy said the projected loss had been reduced to \$67,000 and year-end gifts from donors and a bequest covered the overrun.

The board is forecasting \$1.8 million in income for 2005, about \$200,000 more than 2004. The extra income includes aggressive fund-raising the board plans this year, said former Executive Director Josephine Kelsey.

To balance this year's budget, the board in December decided to reduce expenses related to caring for the extra animals and lay off three full-time employees and two part-time employees, Glancy said. The organization now has 40 full-time staff and about 300 active volunteers.

"We budgeted for 7,000 to 7,500 animals (in 2005) because that's traditionally how many come into the shelter each year," Glancy explained. "So, we asked how many employees were needed to manage this amount. We're dealing with fewer animals, so we need fewer people."

In 2004, the shelter took in 9,694 animals, a 36 percent increase over the 2003 intake figure of 7,131.

Meanwhile, community members and volunteers formed the "Coalition to Save Animals," and began a public awareness campaign through a Web site.

Coalition member Lori Dames said the HSHV's quarterly newsletters, which she described as "the life blood of communication" between the humane society and its supporters, did not mention anything about needing money to stop the shortfall.

"It never said, 'Help!' " Dames said. "If it had, I would have immediately written a check. When this happened, this was a shock to us."

Coalition member David Berger said it was unfortunate that the community wasn't given a chance to help out before the board made cuts and changed the intake policy.

According to the new policy, the society notified other shelters that it will no longer take animals from out-of-county individuals. The shelter, however, will take animals from out-of-county individuals who simply show up with the animals.

The policy further stated the humane society will not take cats from shelters outside the county and will pick only adoptable dogs from shelters outside the county.

Coalition members say accepting dogs and cats from out of the county not only spares the animals from being used in research or euthanized at other shelters, but also fills the cages at the Huron Valley shelter resulting in more adoptions.

"We know we can't save every animal but we have an obligation that we should be helping out," Berger said.

Reducing the amount of intakes inevitably reduces the number of adoptions, so people will go to breeders or elsewhere to find animals.

"We're hoping that they're (the board) going to revisit their decision and fulfill the mission of the society," Dames said. "It's our hope (that) they will develop a plan to refocus resources and start fund raising."

Board President Karen Mendelson said fewer animals will be brought in, "but the goal is to bring in more adoptable animals." She said the number of animals the shelter cares for fluctuates during the year.

"Traditionally, this time of year is our low animal season," Mendelson said. "We always have empty cages this time of year but we don't have more than normal."

Shelter officials have previously said that the animal population begins to increase in March as people drop off litters of abandoned kittens and puppies.

In addition, Kelsey said, cats more than dogs are an overpopulation problem because pet owners are less likely to have cats spayed or neutered.

Mendelson added that the board has "critical responsibilities" such as managing the budget and creating policies that insure the agency's mission is fulfilled.

The volunteers, Mendelson said, have shown "a tremendous amount of energy and interest" in the organization and "this year, we hope to direct some of that energy into increased support for our fund-raising efforts."

The board plans to launch a capital campaign to raise money for a new building, Kelsey said, since its building was built in 1949 and updated once in the 1950s. The board has to determine whether to stay at its site at 3100 Cherry Hill Road, northwest of Ann Arbor, and construct a new building or look for at least 10 acres somewhere in the center of the county, Kelsey said. Meanwhile, employees are working in cramped quarters until a decision is made.

Coalition members say they plan to attend Monday's board meeting to ask more questions.

Glancy said the public is welcomed because the board is looking for help in finding ways to raise more money.

"We hope the community will continue to provide us with talent in the form of volunteers and dollars in the form of support for our events and campaigns," Glancy said.

The Humane Society of Huron Valley is a private, nonprofit agency and is not affiliated with any national organization. All humane societies in Michigan are independent of one another.

For more information, visit the society's Web site at www.hshv.org or call (734) 662-5585. The Coalition to Save Animals' Web site is at www.a2.com/joinin.

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