

Animal wrongs

Animal Control director bristles at 'Dr. Death' tag

By David Hasemyer and David Washburn

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Gently stroking a yellow kitten cuddled in the crook of her elbow, Dr. Dena Mangiamele winced at the nickname given her by critics: "Dr. Death."

Mangiamele found the stray she named Milton in one of her department's three animal shelters. She picked up her nickname when she worked in Los Angeles, where animal rescue groups said too many shelter animals were killed. The name still stings.

"It's cruel," she said in an interview in her office, pointing out that she was the chief veterinarian, not program director, at the Los Angeles city animal-control agency. "We have to euthanize animals in animal control. Euthanasia is not something positive. I like to talk about the positive things -- like how many animals we save."

Leaders of some rescue groups in Los Angeles said Mangiamele was a politician who would rather "kill animals than save them because it was less work."

Others said she may have been controversial in her approach but was a good manager who was "concerned with animal welfare."

Little has been positive between the San Diego County Department of Animal Control director and local animal-welfare organizations since her arrival in May 1999. Disagreements have grown into feuds between Mangiamele and the area's veterinarians, rescue groups and volunteers.

"I know we could save a lot more animals at this moment if everybody worked together -- but they don't," said Sara Ford, a former president of the San Diego County Veterinary Medical Association.

In February, representatives of the Humane Society of the United States spent three days touring county shelters and meeting animal advocates. A preliminary report on their visit noted the "hostility" between the agency and the advocates.



Dr. Dena Mangiamele, Animal Control director

Peggy Peattie/U-T

Animal-control departments differ from other government agencies in that they depend heavily on volunteers and outside agencies to fulfill their mission.

"It is finding partners to help you, finding people who will adopt," said Carl Friedman, director of the San Francisco Department of Animal Care and Control. "Networking, that is a bottom line."

Among Mangiamele's chief critics are leaders of Friends of County Animal Shelters, the county's largest animal rescue organization with more than 3,000 members.

"We feel that (Mangiamele) has fostered a 'we vs. they' attitude, putting the volunteers in a class and pitting them against her employees," said Peggy Howell, a founder of the program.

Mangiamele, who has a doctorate of veterinary medicine from Ohio State University, defends her management style.

"Change takes time to adapt to," she said. "Controversy means you are willing to make change."

And she prides herself on the changes she's brought to the department.

She has reformed adoption policies, added top management positions and initiated the practice of kennel and medical staff making morning rounds together. Also, she hopes to significantly reduce animal kills.

But the biggest change she has overseen was the elimination of spay and neuter surgeries at county shelters. Now those surgeries are "outsourced" to local veterinarians. The vets are paid by the county to do the surgeries at their offices.

Mangiamele said outsourcing, which began in May, is the "magic bullet" that will solve most of the problems in animal control. Shelter medical personnel used to spend at least six hours a day doing spay and neuter surgeries at the shelters, she said. Outsourcing will give them more time to vaccinate and care for animals.

Others doubt outsourcing will be a panacea.

A recent survey of 41 local veterinarians showed that 64 percent favor surgeries at the shelters, which require no transportation of animals.

The cities of Chula Vista and El Cajon are outsourcing now, but plan to bring the surgeries in-house after new facilities are ready.

Keeping the surgeries at the shelters is best for the animals and the people adopting them, said Chula Vista Animal Shelter Manager Theresa Williams.