

# Animal wrongs

**Healthy dogs and cats killed, then listed 'ill' on death records. Kittens euthanized less than a half-hour after arriving. Sick pets going without medicine. Is the Department of Animal Control out of control?**

**By David Hasemyer and David Washburn**  
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

**July 1, 2001**

Animals are needlessly dying and suffering because of neglect and misjudgment by the county agency responsible for providing them with humane care.

Internal department memos, e-mails, animal-care records and dozens of interviews shed a harsh light on how animals have been cared for during the past two years by the San Diego County Department of Animal Control.

Among the findings of a *Union-Tribune* investigation:

- About two dozen animals were advertised for adoption even though they had been killed.
- Animal Control personnel have killed healthy animals, then described them as "ill" and "suffering" in department records.
- Sick animals have gone without treatment, and some incoming animals have not received required vaccinations. One department employee routinely withheld medicine from shelter animals and then lied about it to supervisors.
- In one case, motherless kittens were killed 51 minutes after arriving at a shelter despite a rescue organization's willingness to care for them.

Animal Control Director Dr. Dena Mangiamele acknowledges problems in the 119-employee department, which has a \$10 million annual budget, but said changes she has made since her arrival in 1999 have improved animal care in the three county shelters.

"I came to the Department of Animal Control in San Diego because I wanted to make this department the best department it could be," she said.



A pit bull is injected with a drug and put to sleep.

Peggy Peatie/U-T

And things *are* getting better, Mangiamele said, now that the department has begun a new spay and neuter program and will be opening a multimillion-dollar shelter in the Morena area of San Diego.

The shelter was supposed to open in August, but it was heavily damaged by fire early Friday. It is uncertain how long it will take to repair the fire damage and when the shelter will open.

Mangiamele's critics contend she is the consummate spin doctor, glossing over serious problems. The critics include the volunteers and veterinarians whose help and cooperation are essential to the Department of Animal Control.

The 485-member San Diego County Veterinary Medical Association and the 3,012-member Friends of County Animal Shelters, which has donated \$1.3 million to the county and arranged adoptions for thousands of shelter animals in the past two decades, are the largest organizations critical of Mangiamele and the department.



Dr. Ginny Bischel spays a dog at a private clinic.

"You can see things changing -- and not for the better -- for only so long," said Sara Ford, a local veterinarian and a past president of the association.

Complaints about Animal Control prompted county officials to call upon the Humane Society of the United States to inspect the department. The Humane Society's final report is due in August.

A preliminary report praised Animal Control for its work ethic but criticized some medical procedures and suggested the department has lost the faith of the community.

Peggy Peattie/U-T

The strife comes as the county is one year into a five-year "no kill" program. No kill, a nationwide trend among animal-control agencies, is a policy by which only hopelessly ill or dangerous animals are euthanized.

In the past four years, the county has killed about 18,000 animals a year -- roughly half the animals it impounded. Every animal-control agency has to euthanize, and officials and rescue groups agree that 25 percent is a realistic no-kill goal.

### **Fatal mistakes**

A six-page newspaper section with hundreds of captivating pictures of homeless animals urged readers to "Save a Life . . . Adopt a Pet."

For 23 of the animals, the plea came too late. They were killed at the Carlsbad shelter days before the *Union-Tribune's* special advertising section was published in September.

Mangiamele said many of the animals killed were sick or suffering from kennel neurosis, a condition brought on when they are confined for too long in a kennel.

"If I have an animal suffering, should I hold on to him for two weeks inhumanely so I can show his picture . . . or should I be responsible and think about the animal?"

According to her department's records, more than half the animals killed were classified as adoptable or treatable. And 14 were killed less than a week after their pictures were taken. Three were killed the next day.

Dozens of internal reports say other animals were killed because they were ill or dangerous. Yet the reports provide nothing to back up the diagnoses.

Some examples:

- In April 2000, a pit bull terrier was left at the shelter by her owner. The dog was killed four days later because of "illness." Her medical report was blank.
- Crackers, a 2-year-old chow chow, was dropped off at a shelter May 18, 2000, and was put to death because of "illness" May 21. There is no mention of illness on the medical report.

Last July, a shepherd mix was relinquished by its owner. The dog was classified as "ill" and killed three days later. The only note on the medical report: condition "normal."

Mangiamele acknowledged that these and other animals were misclassified.

But what is more important, she said, is that last year's adoption rate of 26 percent and euthanasia rate of 47 percent were the county's best on record.

"That speaks for working for the animals and should be the No. 1 factor," she said.

How much the department has improved under Mangiamele's tenure is open to interpretation. County records going back to the early 1990s show more adoptions last year than in any other year, but they increased by fewer than 50 -- from 9,682 to 9,725 -- from the previous year. In 1998-99, the fiscal year before Mangiamele arrived, adoptions increased by more than 1,600.

Complicating attempts to compare annual kill rates is a contract signed with the Escondido Humane Society in 1998. Under the contract, the department transfers thousands of animals to Escondido to be adopted or euthanized. Last year, 3,023 animals were reported transferred, but neither county nor Escondido officials could say how many were adopted and how many were killed.

### **'The last resort'**

Managers say Animal Control undertakes "exhaustive measures" to save every animal deemed adoptable.

That means working with adoption counselors to find homes for animals, contacting rescue organizations or sending the animals to other shelters, where they have a better chance of adoption.

"Euthanasia is the last resort . . . truly the last resort," said Tom Hudson, the department's kennel operations manager.

It isn't easy. Every day, decisions must be made about which animals will die. Mostly it's the animals that are sick, vicious or too old to be adopted.

Department memos and e-mails reveal internal conflicts over which animals should be killed.

Employees and volunteers told of instances in which they hid animals to keep them from being killed. One internal memo details a battle between employees and a manager over the fate of a cat.

The cat came to the San Diego shelter May 4. On May 12, a staffer recommended it be placed in a foster home. Another staffer wrote that a lieutenant in the Bonita shelter had offered to take the cat to Friends of County Animal Shelters.

But Janet Walkenhorst, the department's animal medical operations manager, said no. On May 22, she wrote that the Bonita lieutenant "rescued two other cats last week -- this cat is to be disposed (sic)."

The cat was killed that same day. The stated reason: It was ill and suffering.

A manager acknowledged serious problems with how deaths are reported.

In an August e-mail obtained under the California Public Records Act, Dawn Danielson, the regional director of the Bonita shelter, told her staff: "South shows that NO treatable animal was euthanized. They were all 'irremediably suffering.' We all know that is impossible. Also, if you (euthanize) an adoptable animal due to space concerns, call it like it is.

"We never want to be accused of 'phonying' up our stats so we must be 'squeaky' clean on this issue."

In another e-mail, a staff member bristled when asked about the number of animals killed.

"I don't understand why we have to answer to ANYONE in regards to the euthanasia list. The kennels are overcrowded and we need to make sacrifices," an animal-care attendant said in a March e-mail to Hudson, the kennel operations manager.

### **Questions of care**

Beyond the questions surrounding the killing of animals, there is evidence of substandard and often sloppy medical care.

"It is evident that the veterinary, animal care and kennel (line staff) at County shelters is insufficient to properly care for the animals entrusted in their care," the San Diego County Veterinary Medical Association wrote in a letter to the county in January.

Animals in the shelters go days without treatment, and their illnesses are sometimes diagnosed by kennel workers or veterinary technicians rather than by vets, according to interviews and department records. Records also show vaccinations aren't uniformly given to incoming animals, a lapse that has had deadly results.

"To let animals go without medicating and then euthanizing them because they are now REALLY sick is disgusting," one exasperated kennel staff member said in a note last year to Jim Wright, the central shelter's director.

Indeed, veterinary professional standards call for basic medical care for shelter animals. "No sick animal should go untreated in a shelter," said Dr. James Serpell, an associate professor of humane ethics and animal welfare at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine.

Mangiamele and her top lieutenants say they cannot provide long-term intensive care for sick animals, but insist they do their best to provide appropriate care.

Yet records show the medical neglect at the county shelters has sometimes been intentional.

At least one kennel worker "just forgoes medicating . . . and writes it off as 'I didn't have time,' " according to an e-mail written by another shelter employee.

In another case, which Mangiamele said she could not discuss because it is a personnel matter, a staff member deliberately deprived animals of medication and lied about it for years by making false entries on the animals' computer charts, according to one internal memo.

The worker was exposed by co-workers who suspected her of mistreating animals. They emptied all of the pill bottles and waited. As they suspected, the worker told them she had medicated the animals despite there being no medicine in the bottles, according to an internal memo.

"We have ASSUMED all these years that (she) was doing her job and we have found now that she really isn't," the memo said.

### **Five kittens**

Animal rescue volunteers, who play an essential role by helping the department find homes for animals, contend the shortcomings extend beyond one person.

For Chris Manahan, five kittens killed in April are a case in point.

Manahan, who runs the Rosebud Society -- a cat rescue organization -- in La Jolla, said she got an early afternoon call from the volunteer adoption counselor at the Carlsbad shelter asking her to care for the 3-and 4-week-old kittens.

She said she would and called back about an hour later to arrange a pickup. But by then they were dead.

Manahan said shelter workers killed the kittens partly because of her refusal to participate in a new program that requires rescue organizations to return unadopted kittens and puppies to the shelter when they are 8 weeks old. The policy is intended to ensure that animals get spayed or neutered.

"You are crazy if you think I am going to nurse a kitten to health and then send him back to that unhealthy environment," Manahan said.

Mangiamele said staff members were following department policy when they killed the kittens. She said the kittens had upper respiratory infections and, therefore, were not eligible for foster care.

However, Animal Control records show that it was a member of the department's kennel staff, not someone with medical training, who determined the kittens were sick. And Animal Control's policy says upper respiratory infections can be treated with medication.

Manahan called it "the most recent and appalling incident of many."