

# **Police Departments that Manage Animal Shelters: A Challenging Assignment**

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This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future, but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

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The American Humane Association estimates that 9.6 million animals are euthanized annually in the United States. In California alone, more than 800,000 pets are abandoned. Tragically, more than 50% are put to death due to overcrowded animal shelters and the lack of adequate resources. This is not only a national issue; it affects the cities that operate Animal Shelters. This problem not only affects animals, but also has a human toll for shelter employees who have to fulfill their obligation to manage shelter populations and perform the euthanasia. As one shared, *“Each time (you euthanize an animal) it takes a little piece of you with them. And when, as staff, we have to do this over 2,000 times a year, it gets overwhelming. It’s so hard to not get cynical and hate every person who drops off their pet for insignificant reasons.”*

On the pages that follow, we will look at the issues of animal abandonment and euthanasia, both throughout the State of California and in one community in the Central Valley. Using that agency’s successes as an example, we will explore ways others might significantly reduce their shelter’s euthanasia rate. We will also look at ways we can provide support for employees of an animal shelter who must often do work many are just as glad not to think of, but who do it on our behalf anyway.

Relevance to Police Work

One may wonder how this issue is relevant to law enforcement. At first glance, it may appear to be low on the priority scale for a law enforcement organization and therefore easy to dismiss. Certainly, law enforcement has other pressing issues gangs, drugs, homicides...and animal control? For agencies responsible

for their local Animal Shelter, there is no dodging the responsibility to operate it in a humane, responsible and effective manner.

According to a survey of members of the California Police Chiefs Association, there are 34 police departments in the State of California responsible for the operation of their cities animal shelter. The agencies served populations of 6,300 (City of Huron) to 203,413 (City of Fremont). Although executive skills can transfer from policing to other settings, managing a shelter requires specific knowledge and training not readily available for law enforcement managers. Captain Leonard Miranda, who manages the Chula Vista Police Department's shelter, stated "there is nothing I came across in law enforcement that prepared me for taking over an Animal Care Facility."

One could also question if police departments should operate animal shelters. Several police agencies have transitioned the operations of their shelter to other departments in the city. The Upland Police Department recently transferred their Animal Shelter to the Assistant City Managers Office. The City of South Pasadena transferred the responsibility to the Pasadena Humane Society and Chula Vista transferred it to General Services. Conversely, the City of Roseville CA is currently assessing the feasibility of establishing a shelter under their management. For those considering a move in either direction, a closer look at the experiences the Clovis Police Department, which manages the City's animal shelter. Their work to impact euthanasia rates and care for staff can serve as a model for others, whether or not the direct supervision of animal services falls under police purview.

### The Clovis Experience

Clovis CA is located in the Central Valley in the Fresno metropolitan region. It has a population of more than 90,000 in an area of about 24 sq. miles. The Clovis Police Department has had some form of animal control since the 1950's. In 2005, the animal shelter lodged more than 4,537 animals. Of that number

2,890 (63.70%) were euthanized. Currently, there are two full-time staff, six part-time employees, and no volunteers. To study perceived issues with the lodging and euthanasia rates, in 2006 the Department conducted an assessment of the facilities, staffing levels and programs. The goal of the effort was to determine solutions that would reduce the euthanasia rate and decrease the stress on staff.

The assessment included interviews and stress debriefings of shelter staff by George Rodriguez, LCSW. Mr. Rodriguez provides individual and family counseling to the Department. He also oversees the departments Peer Counseling Program, which provides Critical Incident Stress Debriefings for sworn personnel. After the first debriefing, Mr. Rodriguez stated, "I had never witnessed so much intensity of stress as I saw in that (shelter staff) debriefing. It was more than I had ever witnessed in a law enforcement briefing." With experience debriefing more than 50 Critical Incident Stress Debriefings for sworn officers on events from homicides to shootings, Rodriguez's observations were very impactful to those managing the assessment.

One staff member shared their experience working in the "stray building" where lost animals were brought in. *"I started working at the local animal shelter several years ago, because I wanted to help animals. I wasn't prepared for what it was really like to work in a shelter. I couldn't believe what happens there. It was hard enough having to be the one who took in the scared dog who escaped from his back yard and wondered if his owner would come in to get him. But it's another thing when people bring in their pets to the shelter."* Another said, *"What is so hard is that I get attached to the animals. I feed them, I talk to them; and in the end, I'm the one who has to walk over to their cages and take them out...and somehow they know; they always know. I put them on a table and put the needle underneath their skin, into their body until they stop breathing. I have my hands on their fluffy little bodies trying to keep them calm until their heart stops and their chest no longer rises and falls. It's a tough thing having to take the life of a*

*perfectly healthy cat or dog--to have them in your hands and then watch their life leave them."*

The interviews led Rodriguez to conclude the staff was experiencing significant stress, and some members had exhibited symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress. He attributed this to the staff having to euthanize animals, responding to and investigating animal abuse cases, and "like cops, as a general rule, they were usually not dealing with the best of the public." He said the amount of cumulative and Post Traumatic Stress experience by Animal Shelter employees was equal to or greater than what sworn police officers experience. Clovis management staff agreed. One Captain said, "most people, including police officers, don't realize some of the horrendous things Animal Service Officers see." The Captain recalled receiving a phone call from the Manager of Animal Services. The manager was concerned about one of her employees and didn't know what to do. The employee had picked up a dead dog on the side of the road. When the employee found the dog, he saw it had been skinned and its feet had been cut off. The young employee picked up the animal, returned to the shelter to drop the dog off. Later, he was found by a supervisor throwing up behind a building because of the call.

The assessment revealed there had been no significant emphasis placed on reducing the euthanasia rate and increasing the adoption rate. There had also been no assessment of the facilities used, or the nature of assistance for staff that had to perform the euthanasia. The staff at the shelter was eager to find solutions, but had been so busy with day-to-day operations; there was no time or energy for long term planning. They had creative solutions to place animals; taking them home, bribing friends to take them, or find other means to save the lives of the strays in their custody. The goal was to use that creativity to find long-term solutions to benefit both the animals and those who care for them.

### The Assessment Results

The assessment process revealed a number of issues to be addressed for the future. Most prominent amongst these were:

#### Facilities

An assessment of the facility and staffing conducted by Shelter Planners of America concluded that the facilities were over 40 years old, and lacked the needed capacity to hold animals long enough for them to get adopted. The facility was originally only designed as a short term holding facility. It was not originally designed to hold cats, and there was no Quarantine Unit. Due to the construction material of the facility, it was very difficult for staff to clean to keep diseases down. There was no long-term plan to improve the facilities or to create a fundraising plan for a new facility.

#### The Euthanasia Rate

No analysis had been conducted to determine the factors contributing to the euthanasia rate, nor if the rate was comparable to others. According to one shelter manager, the goal for most shelters is to euthanize only those animals that suffer from an untreatable sickness or injury, or are vicious, and therefore a public safety hazard. The reality, though, is that healthy animals are euthanized in all locales due to neglectful owners, local policies or a lack of viable alternatives.

There was no long term plan to increase adoptions and decrease the adoption rate. At a staff meeting with the shelter employees it was suggested that outsourcing the euthanizing of animals could reduce their stress. One employee stated, *"It is important to us to euthanize the animals at our shelter. We feel that if it has to be done, if they have to be put down, then we want it done right. We want it done with compassion and love."*

### Staff Health

Employees were burned out and suffering from symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress as a result of the number of animals they had to euthanize, an often ungrateful public they worked with, facilities that were in poor condition, and perceived disconnect from the police department. There were no established programs to improve employee health. There was no management position assigned to the shelter. The supervisor that was assigned to the shelter had been a lower level position with no real authority to make change.

The stories these staff members told about their experience in the shelter revealed a very difficult environment. It wasn't just euthanizing the animals that caused stress but also the public interaction. One staff member shared: *"One day this guy brought in his two 12-year old cats. He said, 'Here, they're pretty old and I really don't want them anymore.' I thought to myself, 'You don't want them anymore? Who do you think is going to adopt two 12-year old cats?' Couldn't he look around and see where he was leaving 'his cats?' We have an old archaic building that wasn't even built to house cats. I wouldn't leave my worst enemy's cat here". I then give him the standard spiel we give to people to try and get them to keep their pets. I told him, 'do you realize that it is going to be very, very difficult to adopt out two old cats? And if we don't adopt them out, we are going to have to euthanize them, to kill them.'* He nods his head, *'Yeah, I know.'*

*"Since this doesn't work I go to Plan B (Plan B is our last ditch effort to get people to keep their animals, it's the cold hard facts, told in a not so sensitive fashion. I told the guy that his cats would be euthanized if we were not able to find a home for them; and since older cats are the most difficult to find homes for, and we were overcrowded, they would most surely be euthanized. He still remained unmoved by any thoughts of his pets dying. So, I took his cats, unfortunately I didn't have a Plan C."*

*“When he left I was angry and resentful. I was angry at him--he took his cats, raised them, and when they were no longer useful, he just passed the buck to me. I wish this was an anomaly, but it’s not. I have had this same scenario repeated so many times that I couldn’t help but feel ticked off. It is so disappointing to see that there are so many insensitive people out there.”*

### The Strategic Plan

Subsequent to the assessment process, a strategic plan to address core issues was developed. With support from the Chief of Police, management staff sought to determine facility and staffing needs, a funding mechanism for needed improvements, and programs for staff health. A Nominal Group Technique (NGT) expert group consisting of a Veterinarian, Shelter Managers, Law Enforcement Executives, a police department Clinical Social Worker and Community Members was utilized to answer the following question: “What type of facility and programs would reduce the euthanasia rate in the next ten years?” Based on the outcome of the NGT process, interviews with staff members, other department members and community members the following plan was initiated:

### Facility

The Shelter Planners of America partnered with the Police Department and the City’s Planning Department to revitalize the existing shelter and to design a future shelter. There was key support and buy in from the Chief of Police and City Manager. Executive Staff of the Police Department agreed to make the funding of a new facility the department’s top Capital Improvement priority.

### Funding

The budget of the Animal Services Division reflected that community members dropping off animals were not willing to pay appropriate fees. Citizens had varied excuses and reasons on why they could not pay the fees. Experience revealed that, if staff did not negotiate fees with citizens, they would just turn the animals loose on the street. This was a very poor solution, as animals would either end

up at the shelter anyway, or they would be injured in traffic accidents or killed by other animals.

A community-based non-profit (Friends of the Clovis Pet Adoption Center) was formed to assist the city with fundraising for a new facility, and to raise money for rehabilitating the old one. An annual fundraiser was initiated to increase community involvement, raise awareness, and raise money for the shelter. The non-profit has raised about \$35,000 in the last two years. This has been done with minimal effort, and shows great promise as a source of significant funds in the future. Also, a partnership was formed with local veterinarians to assist with spaying and neutering of animals at minimal cost.

### Staff Health

George Rodriguez conducted a 2-month weekly “debriefing” for the staff designed to assist with Symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress, and to provide education on healthy ways to deal with stress. Critical Incident Stress Debriefings were initiated for traumatic events. Those debriefing were conducted in the same manner and by the same staff as provided for police officers. Employees were also encouraged to utilize department-sponsored employee assistance and mental health services.

Full time staff positions and part-time staffing positions were more than doubled. A new volunteer program resulted in the addition of 20 volunteers. Animal Services was also included in the annual staffing recommendations plan for the Police Departments Master Service Plan. Since Animal Services was located at a separate location, efforts were made to make the staff feel more of a part of the police department

With assistance from Mr. Rodriguez, criteria were created to determine which employees could perform euthanasia. A contract employee, who staff trusted, was hired to assist with euthanizing animals. The department and adoption

center was given a new name. The “Animal Shelter” became “Animal Services” and “Rusty’s Place” became the “Clovis Pet Adoption Center.” The Annual fundraiser included an awards program to recognize the exemplary work of the staff at the shelter and community volunteers.

### Lowering the Euthanasia Rate

Staff was empowered to come up with solutions to reduce the euthanasia rate. Creative adoption programs were proposed and implemented. Staff was given approval to transport animals to private animal rescue agencies. Assessment revealed many animals were euthanized for diseases that could easily be treated if the city had a quarantine building. Not allowing lack of funding to be an obstacle, an old office portable was refurbished and turned into a quarantine building.

The City’s website was updated to include the adoption center. A management position was created to operate the shelter, and was given authority to make significant changes. More attention was given to ordinances and laws that would impact the Animal Shelter. Priority was given to spaying and neutering animals as this is one of the major solutions to the problem of the overpopulation of pets.

### Results

In 2005, Clovis lodged 4,055 animals (1623 dogs, and 2,432 cats). Of that number 657 dogs were euthanized (40.8%) and 2,080 cats were euthanized (85.5%) for a total euthanasia rate of 67.4%.

In 2006, Clovis lodged 3,785 animals (1,664 dogs and 2,120 cats). Of that number, 404 dogs were euthanized (24.2%) and 2,120 cats were euthanized (83%) for a total euthanasia rate 57%. This resulted in a decrease of 573 animals euthanized; 253 dogs (16.2% less) and 320 cats (2.5% less) for a total reduction of 10.3%.

In comparison, the 2006 euthanasia rates for two city shelters in the same region were:

- The City of Fresno, (population 481,035) lodged about 41,692 animals (21,779 dogs and 19,913 cats). Fresno euthanized 14,924 dogs (68.5%) and 17,223 cats (86.4%) with a total euthanasia rate of 77%.
- The City of Visalia, (population 115,000) lodged more than 11,765 animals (5,852 dogs and 5,913 cats). Visalia euthanized 2,738 dogs (46.7%) and 4,158 cats (70.3%).

Certainly, the rate for differing cities may vary. The drop in animals euthanized in Clovis, though, was significant and bears study by others. The results thus far in 2007 have continued the success seen in Clovis in 2006. To date, only dogs that were sick, injured or vicious were euthanized. The euthanasia rate for cats remained the same as 2006 due to an increase in disease unrelated to the changes.

The non-profit is partnering with the city to help pay for a consultant to create a Capital Campaign for a new state of the art shelter the community can feel proud of. Employee health has improved dramatically. Although the facility is outdated, the Planning Department has assisted with numerous improvements that have improved the condition of the adoption facility.

#### Considerations for Others

Law enforcement managers given the responsibility of managing a shelter should contact other executives who have had the experience and have been successful. Captain Leonard Miranda in Chula Vista was responsible for making extensive changes in their Animal Shelter. He stated, "Of all the projects I've been involved with, none were as challenging and fraught with contention among staff and the community as the Animal Care facility."

Since there is no available training to prepare a manager to operate a shelter, many departments successfully operating a shelter seem to have learned from trial and error and paved their own path. It would be helpful if an organization such as California Chiefs of Police created a database of Police Executives who are been responsible for operating their own facilities. This would create an instant resource for those executives that are taking on a new command or dealing with a new issue. An association for law enforcement personnel who are responsible for managing shelters would also be highly beneficial. This would provide an opportunity to discuss and create standards for Animal Shelters, develop policy and procedures, make policy recommendations and assist managers who have been newly assigned to Animal Services throughout the State.

### Conclusion

Often people will ask the employees at the shelter “if it is so bad working in an animal shelter, why don’t you just quit?” The collective response from those working in, or managing, shelters is: *When people ask me, “Why do you do it? My answer is that I do it because I love animals. I do it because I have a dream that one day we won’t be euthanizing 2,000 animals. I have a dream that one day we will have an awesome facility and educational programs, that we will have a community that will be supportive and responsible pet owners. I have a dream that one-day things will be different.”*

Many agencies may not have direct shelter responsibilities. For those that do, consider a process similar to that engaged in Clovis. The successes seen translate to less needless death of animals and greater physical and mental health for our employees. Even if your agency does not manage shelter operations, we are all clients of the animal care system. Our larger responsibility remains the same; we speak and act for those that cannot. What, then, will your actions be?