

'This all trickles down to the animals. That's what this is all about.'

AMY STRICKLAND, CITIZENS FOR RESPONSIBLE
ANIMAL SHELTER MANAGEMENT

New voice in county for animal rights



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

These 'cat condos' are among the items some former Animal Services agency volunteers are criticizing, saying they are too small, but agency chief Henry Brzezinski, right, says they are cleaner, safer and healthier for cats.

Watchdog group criticizes Animal Services management; county says complaints unwarranted

By SHANNA McCORD
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — A new animal-rights group has formed to tackle accusations of reduced food for animals, little human interaction with cats and dogs, rude treatment of volunteers and wrongful euthanasia at the Santa Cruz County Animal Services Authority.

The watchdog group, Citizens for Responsible Animal Shelter Management, has about 25 members that include at least one former Animal Services employee and several former volunteers. It was formed a couple of months ago in response to what group members say was an increasingly hostile work environment by management at the shelter and new policies



put in place during the past year that have resulted in poor treatment of animals.

Animal Services' General Manager Henry Brzezinski defended the shelter, which

Amy Strickland, former Animal Services worker, has formed her own animal welfare group. She alleges poor management at the county shelter.

1-2-09
moved from Scotts Valley to a new building on 7th Avenue in Santa Cruz in October, and the work of its 33-member staff and volunteer base of about 150 as doing everything possible to keep animals healthy and reunite them with their owners or find them new homes.

Brzezinski, who has worked in animal welfare for 26 years and was hired by the county in July from El Dorado County, says Santa Cruz County shelter's rules and procedures match or exceed industry standards for "best" animal care.

Susan Mauriello, a member of the shelter's governing board since it was created in 2002, declined to discuss allegations related to personnel,

Services

Continued from Page A1

but expressed confidence in shelter management and the direction of animal care.

"Every strong organization has occasions where things are not done precisely to procedures," Mauriello said. "However, adoptions have been up, euthanasia is down. This is a very sensitive, very caring community toward animals."

Amy Strickland, founder of Citizens for Responsible Animal Shelter Management, worked for county Animal Services and the Santa Cruz SPCA for 12 years before resigning in February to go back to school.

Strickland was passed over for a management position at the shelter in 2006.

She stayed on with the shelter as a volunteer, she said, because she was concerned about what she calls a lack of staffing and inadequate treatment of the animals.

Strickland said Brzezinski "fired me as a volunteer" in October for speaking out against shelter policies she opposed. She and others have spoken to the shelter's governing board about their concerns and allegations.

Strickland and others have called for shelter management to step down, including shelter Manager Staycee Dains, and formed the new oversight group to give a voice to employees and volunteers who allegedly witness unethical treatment at shelters.

The group's goal is to improve animal care and ensure state animal welfare laws are followed at all shelters by bringing issues to the public and elected leaders and taking legal action if necessary.

Problems at the shelter alleged by Strickland and a handful of other volunteers, including Ruth Mutch, who quit her three-year volunteer position in November, includes limiting food for cats to one-quarter of a cup a day, restricting human contact with feral cats, not walking dogs three times a day, confrontations with the public and unwarranted deadlines for euthanasia.

Brzezinski said the amount of food given to animals is approved by the shelter's veterinarian, and in most cases shelter animals need less food than more active pets.

Dogs are given a half-cup each day for every 10 pounds of body weight, which is a little less than what they were fed last year, Brzezinski said.

By comparison, cats at the SPCA in Monterey are given up to a half-cup of food twice a day, that agency's operations director Lisa Hoefler said.

"The amount is really dependent on the caloric value of the food and activity levels of the animals," Hoefler said. "A quarter-cup could be appropriate."

Feral cats are kept in separate rooms at the Santa Cruz County shelter and allowed contact only with trained staff



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Volunteers and employees exercise the animals in a number of play areas at the 7th Avenue shelter.



Hand sanitizers are stationed throughout the shelter to minimize the risk of passing ailments from one animal to another.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

conduct by shelter management cited by Strickland, Mutch and others was the euthanasia of a kitten in front of a teen volunteer at the Animal Services facility in Watsonville.

Brzezinski was made aware of the euthanasia, and says it was done according to shelter standards and humane animal welfare law, though the location was "inappropriate."

"In that situation, the animal should have been taken to the back. There just happened to be people in the room at that time, and euthanasia is normally not done with other people around," he said. "Because it's a personnel matter, I'm not at liberty to discuss how it was dealt with. It was addressed."

Brzezinski said more than 6,000 animals — dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, snakes and rats — are expected to end up in the shelter this year, which would be a few hundred more animals than previous

years due partly to the bad economy and more people feeling comfortable turning animals in at a new, modern facility.

Currently, there are 173 animals at the Santa Cruz County shelter, which is slightly less than normal due to recent adoptions.

As an "open-admission" shelter, the organization is required by law to house any stray, abandoned or lost animal. There is no set time for how long animals are allowed to stay before being euthanized, Brzezinski said. The typical stay is up to a month, he said.

The primary goal, Brzezinski said, is to take care of the animals' medical needs and find them homes.

There were more than 200 animal adoptions in both October and November, which he said has doubled from the same time last year.

The shelter's euthanasia rate in October was about 20 percent, he said. In October 2007, the rate was 38 percent.

The Monterey SPCA's euthanasia rate is around 30 percent.

Still, Strickland and other members of Citizens for Responsible Animal Shelter Management said they will keep a close eye on the county's shelter practices and voice concern or take legal action when needed.

"This all trickles down to the animals," she said. "That's what this is all about."

Brzezinski said he's willing to work with any "reasonable" group to improve the lives of animals.

Contact Shanna McCord at 429-2401 or smccord@santacruzsentinel.com