

## FALL OF THE SPCA

# County-run shelter works to fill SPCA's void

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A new staff of about 20, operating out of a less-than-perfect work space, is wrestling with its new role as the county's animal services agency.

The responsibility of handling lost pets and forsaken strays fell upon the new-sprung group in July when county leaders abruptly ended their animal-services contract with the nonprofit SPCA and decided to operate their own animal control service.

Nine months later, the new county-run Animal Services Authority is working to find homes for the county's strays while also keeping the door of its euthanasia chamber as tightly shut as possible.

The ASA, so far, has collected 2,067 cats and dogs, corralled lost livestock on county roads, including three disoriented horses on Highway 9 two weeks ago, and rescued a corn snake native to the eastern half of the continent.

About 75 percent of the agency's animals have been reunited with their owners or placed in new households, agency officials estimate.

"Our staff is keeping up with the calls," said ASA head Mike McFarland, who has been in and out of the animal services business for more than 15 years.

But like any start-up, there have been glitches.

medical problems as the primary reason for putting the animals down.

A small, windowless room, with only a sink and table, serves as the euthanasia chamber.

"Our base issue is not to euthanize the animals because of space," noted McFarland, who says adoption efforts over the past nine months, as a whole, have been successful.

The SPCA's old animal shelter, on 7th Avenue in Live Oak, averaged a similar euthanasia rate of 27 percent in the four years prior to its closing, according to SPCA officials. The slightly lower ASA rate is owed to the fact the ASA has had fewer animals to deal with since opening last year and the luxury of having a completely empty shelter to fill.

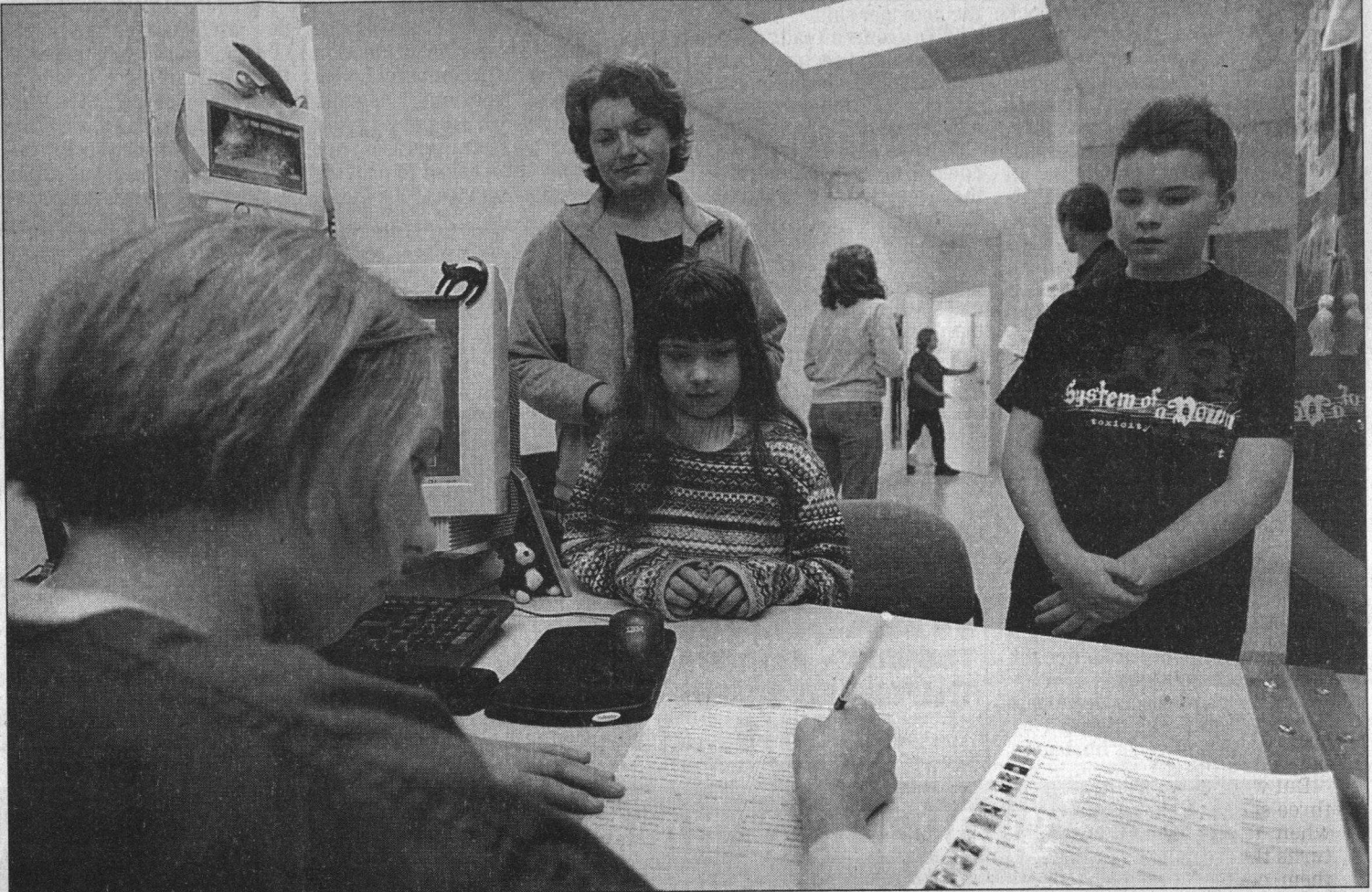
McFarland says he expects future rates of euthanasia to remain comparable to the SPCA's.

What the right kill level should be is difficult to assess, say animal services experts, but most have not been critical of the county's rate.

"There are too many variables to gauge," said Sandi Stadler, superintendent of Palo Alto Animal Services, which serves Palo Alto, Mountain View, Los Altos and Los Altos Hills. "Knowing the people that work out there, though, they certainly have my vote (of confidence.)"

## A bad space

Other concerns about animal



Sarah Pierce and her brother Ian come to the shelter with au pair Petra Papezova looking to adopt a dog.

store animals and accessible to the public landed the fledgling agency

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



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The ASA's location in Scotts Valley has proven to be an inconvenient spot (the SPCA's Live Oak shelter was more centrally located) and the facility is hardly ideal. Formerly high-tech offices, the ASA facility has limited space and no outdoor quarters for the animals.

"We certainly have a lot of work to do," McFarland said.

The ASA is the county's first venture into the animal services business — at an estimated \$1.5 million annual cost to taxpayers. It was launched after a county audit detailed big fiscal problems at the SPCA. The two parties are still negotiating how the SPCA can pay off a roughly \$761,000 debt to the county.

After the fallout, 24 staffers with the SPCA defected to the newly formed ASA. Headed by McFarland, the lone newcomer, and an oversight board of seven, the agency set up shop in a 12,000-square-foot commercial space on Janis Way.

Today, the site, which serves as an animal shelter and a base for seeking out stray animals and nuisance pets, contains roughly 40 dog kennels, 40 cat cages and 25 corrals for rabbits, guinea pigs, chickens and other animals.

On Wednesday, the facility housed a total of 109 critters.

## Euthanasia

Blue signs reading "adoptable" mark the cages of the animals that are spayed or neutered, deemed medically fit by vets and await adoption by new pet lovers.

Animals in other cages sit out a waiting period to see if an owner will come and claim them.

Unfortunately, many of the animals will never go home, either to an old home or a new one.

ASA officials say about 25 percent of the animals have been put to death since the agency was launched. They cite behavioral or

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Other concerns about animal welfare remain, however. One is the lack of access animals have to the outdoors.

"The dogs should have a place they can go indoors and outdoors," said Brookdale resident Mark Sullivan, who got his last dog at a shelter. "They don't."

ASA officials say a volunteer force, which consists of nearly 90 people, helps get the animals out of their cages several times a day.

"They still don't have access to sunlight and a breeze whenever they want," animal technician Daniel Griffen said.

Additionally, some kennels at the new animal shelter are smaller than the ones at the SPCA shelter. Dog kennels, for example, are 25 percent smaller, at 4 feet by 6 feet instead of 4 by 8.

"What happens when they go to the bathroom?" Sullivan asked.

The total number of kennels for animals is also lower than what it was at the SPCA. However, by July, ASA officials expect to maintain a similar capacity.

But even at that SPCA's former capacity, space is likely to run short, a problem typical at animal shelters.

The old SPCA facility was almost always full or approaching full, said SPCA public affairs coordinator Suzi Eszterhas. Though a last resort, the obvious way to free up space is to kill animals, she said.

"Sometimes we simply did have to euthanize for space and that's a reality all shelters have to face," Eszterhas said.

That pressure is not likely to subside at the county-run shelter, though McFarland says he's "committed" to resisting it.

Few deny that the new quarters are less than perfect.

With the SPCA suddenly out of the picture, the county-run shelter had to take form quickly. The difficulty of finding space appropriate for barking dogs, big enough to

store animals and accessible to the public landed the fledgling agency at the end of a warehouse-lined road.

The commercial space had been previously occupied by computer chip manufacturer Cubic Memory. The company's clean room was quickly transformed into space for newly purchased dog kennels which were put into use in December.

Additional equipment was bought or leased from local veterinarians, and the ASA today continues to furnish its new quarters. Their lease is through December 2005.

McFarland expects the agency to move to a more suitable location after the lease expires. His hope is that the now vacant SPCA facility will eventually become the ASA's home.

Last year's attempts to lease the SPCA space, with a financial dispute lurking between the county and the SPCA, failed to produce any rental agreement.

The SPCA site, beyond having more appropriate facilities, would also give the ASA a more centralized location, McFarland says.

With the nearest neighboring animal services in Watsonville and San Jose, the ASA serves the better part of Santa Cruz County.

## The ASA vs. SPCA

Beyond location, some other differences exist between the new ASA operation and the old SPCA operation.

The SPCA had employed between 30 and 40 people at any given time while the ASA is allotted only 28 by the county.

The SPCA's animal control officers — the ones who pick up strays and enforce pet regulations — carried protective firearms and had expanded law enforcement powers, unlike the county's current animal-control officers.

The ASA is also without the SPCA's longtime donor pool,



Petra Papezova, Sarah Pierce and Ian Pierce check out a dog before considering an adoption at the county's new Animal Services Center in Scotts Valley.

which forked over more than \$300,000 last fiscal year.

Public funding for the agencies remains similar. The ASA will receive roughly \$1.5 million in taxpayer money next fiscal year.

Despite any disadvantages, McFarland says the new agency will meet its responsibility to the county and, unlike the old SPCA, will do it without claims of malfeasance.

"We emphasize public account-

ability," he said.

McFarland has other ideas for bolstering ASA operations as well.

In the works is a plan to implant computer chips in all released animals by summer for tracking purposes. On the financial side, McFarland plans to clamp down on the payment of pet license fees, which he sees as a significant stream of new revenue for the agency.

With the SPCA having left behind a bad name for shelter operations, McFarland knows his agency's fiscal matters will be closely scrutinized by county officials.

"They're not unfair to me in being overly picky," he said. "I'm comfortable in that situation."

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