



CHAPTER 1

The Role of Animal Control in Local Government

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Tracing its origins back to the mid-1800s, municipal animal control functions have experienced significant transition and growth. Originally charged with picking up and killing stray dogs to address the spread of rabies, local health departments hired individuals to go out into the cities and round up dogs found roaming the streets. Dubbed “dog catchers,” these men were paid a reward per dog caught and killed. They were considered to be providing strictly a public safety function.

In 1863 the city of Los Angeles established the nation’s first city “pound” to house stray animals, and more and more cities followed suit. In 1868, Henry Berg of New York formed the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), the first organization of its kind in the country. Public awareness of the mistreatment of animals, both by individuals and local governments, soon led to changes in how animal control functioned and how stray and free-roaming animals were handled.

Animal care and control today

Today’s animal care and control continues to provide the original public health and safety function, but now also focuses on animal protection. One of the reasons for this is that the public expects humane care of animals when they are in the hands of our government. No longer is catch-and-kill an acceptable answer to stray and free-roaming animals. The expectation is that while animals are in the care of animal control, they are properly fed, provided with necessary medical attention and physical and mental stimulation, and ultimately returned to their homes or rehomed.

Municipal animal shelters used to be referred to as the “pound,” because animals were kept there during impoundment and simply killed once the legally mandated hold time ex-

pired. Today's animal care and control department plays a much more dynamic role in the community, and long ago shed the "pound" name and image. Now commonly referred to as an animal shelter, the focus is on achieving, at minimum, the five freedoms¹ for all animals in their care. And more and more shelters add a sixth freedom: the freedom from premature end of life for animals who are not terminally ill or dangerous. These shelters act as a

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resource center for families, places where they can adopt new animal companions, seek services to resolve issues with their pets and find lost pets, as well as provide community service in the way of volunteering.

Never before has the public been so interested and involved in the care of animals in their communities, and as a result this provides animal control agencies with exceptional opportunities to improve the quality of care they provide. With these new opportunities, however, come new challenges and financial considerations from our governments. The cost of care is increasing as the services provided grow to meet societal expectations and needs.

Those costs include providing daily care and enrichment, such as proper sanitation and disease control, proper nutrition, adequate physical and mental stimulation, and proper medical care. (Veterinary service costs in general are rising.) All of this, of course, is part of ensuring that no animal suffers during his or her stay in the shelter. Facility management comes with additional costs, as does staffing the facility with appropriately trained professionals. In today's highly competitive world, competitive salaries are needed to recruit and retain skilled staff.

While the costs have increased, a recent study² conducted by students from the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver looked at the economic impact these types of cost increases had on the city of Austin, Texas, and concluded:

"The costs associated with implementing the (no-kill resolution) appear to have been more than offset by a series of economic benefits to the community. The majority of the positive economic impacts result from increased employment within animal services as well as the increased use of pet care and pet retail services. An additional benefit appears to be the positive contribution of Austin's progressive animal welfare policies to its brand equity. This impact is important as municipalities compete with each other to attract employee demographics that in turn draw new business and new economic growth to their area."

Current goals of animal control facilities

Two of the primary goals of the modern animal control facility are to reduce the number of animals coming into the shelter through prevention programs and to move those who do enter the system out alive as quickly as possible. Strategies to achieve the first goal include managed intake and targeted spay/neuter programs.

One way to accomplish the second goal is to establish robust return-to-owner (RTO) programs. Publicly encouraging those who have lost pets to file “lost pet” reports and to visit the shelter often to search for their pets helps increase the shelter’s RTO rates. In addition, offering free or low-cost microchips to pet owners can significantly increase the RTO rate. More and more agencies are now conducting return-to-owner programs from the field. If an animal is found and has identifiers such as an ID tag or microchip, the field officer can return the animal to his or her home rather than having the pet enter the shelter. (For more information on RTO, see [Appendix D](#), “Return-to-Owner Strategies.”)

To increase adoptable animals’ chances of being placed quickly into new homes, animal control agencies are collaborating with rescue groups to transfer animals from one organization to another. By moving animals from the shelter to the adoption programs of rescue partners, space is created in the animal control facility, which can help eliminate the need to kill healthy, treatable animals.

Customer-friendly adoption programs are also essential to moving animals out of the shelter system in a timely fashion. Effective strategies include implementing policies that remove barriers to adoption, such as keeping shelters open in the evenings and on weekends. The use of creative marketing techniques, social media and traditional media to promote the animals and the adoption program are also critical. Encouraging people to adopt provides an opportunity for the public to help animal control increase their lifesaving capacity. (For more information, see [Appendix I](#), “Adoption Programs.”)

These and other progressive practices of today’s municipal shelters have broadened the role of animal control, making it about community service rather than just enforcement. Working together to devise creative solutions to complex challenges in a community helps bridge the gap between government agencies and the people they serve.

Maintaining original functions of animal control

Many of the original functions of animal control remain primary responsibilities, such as enforcing local ordinances related to loose, unregistered and dangerous dogs; providing rescue services for animals in need; investigating allegations of abuse and mistreatment; and providing information to pet owners about proper care of their pets.

Top priorities on the list of services provided are conducting thorough and unbiased investigations into animal bites, placing animals under quarantine if necessary, and helping to

ensure that animals are properly vaccinated. Protecting the public from the spread of rabies is still a primary function of animal control, although the threat of rabies has decreased considerably over the years and continues to do so.

During the course of a bite investigation, it is the animal control officer's responsibility to determine whether the biting animal should be considered dangerous under the law. This determination should be based on the animal's behavior in light of the situational context, and never merely on the animal's appearance or breed. Studies repeatedly refute speculation that certain breeds are naturally more aggressive than others. Just as any dog can bite, any dog can be a safe, cherished member of a household.

To establish what truly occurred, officers conducting these investigations must be well versed in animal behavior and general investigation techniques, and be able to provide an objective, well-documented case file. Many animal bites are due to extenuating circumstances that would not be considered normal for the animal, and that should be taken into consideration. Deeming an animal dangerous often carries serious consequences, such as the life of the animal being taken or litigation against the government on the part of the animal's owner, who appeals the decision.

It is also the role of the animal control field officer to provide rescue services to stray and free-roaming animals who are in distress, whether it's a cat who has been hit by a motor vehicle, a dog who has fallen through the ice on a frozen pond or a wild animal who has become trapped and must be released back to safety. The specialized training and equipment necessary to perform these rescues cannot be taken lightly. Multiple organizations around the country provide certification training and should be sought out by each municipality to ensure that officers, animals and the public are safe from injury during these situations. When trained officers rescue animals safely and confidently, it also can result in well-deserved, positive media attention.

Depending on the size of the agency and the volume of calls for service, responding to emergency calls on a 24-hour basis may be a necessity. Twenty-four-hour coverage can be accomplished either by having an officer dedicated to after-hours shifts or by having a rotational on-call schedule.

Requirements for animal cruelty investigations

Animal cruelty is a felony in most states; in others, there are felony provisions for certain acts, such as animal fighting, torture and severe physical abuse. This puts the field officer in the position of being a criminal investigator, so proper training — identical to what municipal police officers receive — is recommended to provide the highest level of protection for the animals in our communities.

An animal cruelty investigator should receive training in interpretation of laws, search and seizure, constitutional rights, investigative techniques, interview and interrogation skills, and

crime scene analysis. While there are countless opportunities from animal advocacy and protection groups to obtain this training, securing the ability to attend classes in the local police academy provides consistency in government procedures and builds relationships between the animal control field officers and the local police officers. This relationship between departments is valuable because on many occasions local police officers will require the assistance of animal control, and vice versa. Since both serve as the law enforcement authority in the community, it is expected that they work hand-in-hand.

Once trained in basic criminal investigations, the officer can then attend specialized training offered by organizations such as the National Animal Care & Control Association (NACA), a trade organization dedicated to promoting professionalism in animal care and control. Officers should also work with the local prosecutor's office to learn the particular policies and procedures needed to successfully prosecute animal cruelty cases.

Animal control field officers face dangers that are similar to those experienced by police officers, so it's vital to train and equip officers to keep them safe. In many cases, the individuals being investigated for animal crimes are also under investigation for other crimes involving drugs, firearms and/or gang-related activities. These individuals, often violent criminals, see animal control as a threat and will react no differently than they would if confronted by police officers. Study after study^{3,4} reinforce the notion that those who would harm an animal are more likely to harm humans.

Emulating community-based policing

A relatively new component of animal control is engaging the community directly to work together to solve community problems. Animal control field officers are stepping out of their vehicles and applying the model of community-based policing to interact with residents. Employing creative problem-solving and collaborating with residents, field officers are devising successful strategies to resolve common yet often complex community issues involving animals. For example, encouraging property owners to use humane deterrents to keep unwanted animals off their property is far more effective than the traditional method of lethal removal.

Data gathered by animal control can reveal "hot spots" (for example, the neighborhoods where most of the dog bites are occurring). Once these "hot spots" are identified, strategies can be developed and resources allocated to address the specific needs of the area neighborhood by neighborhood.

Oftentimes, the public is recruited to assist animal control by maintaining a watchful eye, helping the elderly care for their pets, assisting with fence repair (either to confine dogs or to get dogs off tethers), building shelters for animals who live outdoors and providing ongoing care for community cats. In the past, these needs were traditionally left unaddressed by animal control or were dealt with in a manner that proved ineffective and inhumane. Today's

proactive agencies address these issues before they become problems in the community and result in the demand for extreme action, such as removing and killing animals.

A successful relationship between animal control and the public relies very heavily on trust. This trust can be built by showing the public that animal control officers not only provide a valuable public service, they also care deeply about their roles and responsibilities. When animal control officers engage with the community (e.g., being present in the community, attending community meetings, and offering support and assistance when needed), animal control earns much-deserved respect and starts to build those critical relationships.

Working collaboratively with residents, implementing lifesaving programs and maintaining a professional demeanor all positively affects the animal control agency's image in the community. Without public support, animal control agencies struggle with multiple challenges and ultimately fail to serve fully the public and the animals they are responsible for protecting.

NOTES

1. The five freedoms outline five aspects of animal welfare under human control:
 1. **Freedom from hunger or thirst** by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigor
 2. **Freedom from discomfort** by providing an appropriate environment, including shelter and a comfortable resting area
 3. **Freedom from pain, injury or disease** by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment
 4. **Freedom to express (most) normal behavior** by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind
 5. **Freedom from fear and distress** by ensuring conditions and treatment that avoid mental suffering

Available at aspcapro.org/sites/pro/files/aspca_asv_five_freedoms_final_0_0.pdf.

2. S. Hawes et al., *Legislating Components of a Humane City: The Economic Impacts of the Austin, Texas "No Kill" Resolution*. (Institute for Human-Animal Connection, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, 2017). Available at animalstudiesrepository.org.
3. C. Luke, A. Arluke and J. Levin, *Cruelty to Animals and Other Crimes: A Study by the MSPCA and Northeastern University*. (Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 1997). Available at support.mspca.org/site/DocServer/cruelty-to-animals-and-other-crimes.pdf?docID=12541.
4. F.R. Ascione, "Animal Abuse and Youth Violence," *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, September 2001). Available at nationallinkcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Ascione-OJJDP-2001.pdf.