

Help stem the tide of euthanasia of homeless and unwanted animals.

Recently there has been a lot of talk about euthanasia of animals at the Regional Center for Animal Control and Protection (RCACP), colloquially known as the “Pound.” It is a fact that millions of unwanted cats and dogs are euthanized every year in the United States and that roughly 4,500 animals were euthanized at the Pound in Roanoke last year. People have sought to find someone to blame for this very sad reality. Ironically, some people are attempting to blame the one organization that does more than anyone else to *prevent* euthanasia at the Pound, the Roanoke Valley SPCA.

Understandably, there has been some confusion about the relationship between the Roanoke Valley SPCA (RVSPCA) and the Pound. To understand that relationship, you have to understand the purposes of the two entities. The Pound fulfills an animal control/law enforcement function that is required by state law. Among other things, the Pound is needed to house stray animals that are picked up by Animal Control and provide a place where citizens can find and reclaim animals that have been picked up. The Pound is funded with tax money and was never designed to provide adoption services. The RVSPCA is a charitable organization, funded by donations, whose mission is to “improve the quality of life for animals and the people they touch in the Roanoke Valley.” As part of that mission, the RVSPCA seeks to find homes for as many of the unclaimed animals at the Pound as it can.

It used to be that the RVSPCA’s adoption operation and the Pound were in the same horrible building and the municipalities provided a bare minimum of funds to the RVSPCA to run the Pound. In roughly 2001, the RVSPCA decided that it needed to separate from the Pound, close the existing facility, build a new building and become a “no kill of adoptable animals” shelter. The RVSPCA believed that it would be able to adopt out more animals in a shelter environment where potential adopters did not have to fear looking into the eyes of animals that would be euthanized if they were not adopted. However, the RVSPCA never fooled itself into thinking that by starting a new “no kill” shelter, euthanasia of unwanted animals would cease in Roanoke. The only reason that any animal shelter can call itself “no kill” is if it is a limited admission facility. A shelter that must take in all the strays that are brought to it (like the Pound) is eventually going to run out of both cage space and resources to care for the animals. Euthanasia then ensues.

So, the RVSPCA began working on its plans to build a new shelter and the municipalities began scrambling to find or build another facility and find a third party to run it. This was a governmental responsibility that they were required by law to fulfill. Community leaders, however, stepped in and convinced the RVSPCA that it would be best for the community and more cost efficient for all parties concerned if the RVSPCA and the municipalities (Roanoke City, Roanoke County, Botetourt County and the Town of Vinton) worked together on a joint project.

The plan that emerged was to build two separate buildings on one piece of property owned by the RVSPCA. The RVSPCA, because of its experience in running an animal

shelter and its passion for preventing animal cruelty, was persuaded to take on the task of managing the Pound for the municipalities. It would do this through a separate entity called Animal Care Services. In return, the municipalities agreed to provide realistic funding for the Pound. Although the RVSPCA did not want to be in the business of managing a governmental pound, where it does not have the power to set policy or determine the budget, the RVSPCA felt that it was best for the animals if it took on this task. This has in fact been a good thing for the animals because the RVSPCA has used its position to advocate on behalf of the animals. For example, because of the RVSPCA's efforts, the municipalities have agreed to pay for disease-preventing vaccinations and better veterinary care for the animals at the Pound.

Returning to the issue at hand, the criticism currently leveled against the Pound is that too many "adoptable" cats and dogs are being euthanized there. The RVSPCA couldn't agree more. In fact, that is the primary reason that the RVSPCA exists – to fight this terrible problem. That is why the RVSPCA and its caring staff, its dedicated board of directors and its army of kind volunteers get up every morning and do what they do. They love animals. And the RVSPCA rescues as many of the animals at the Pound as it can. Last year, the RVSPCA rescued almost 1,400 animals from the Pound. It also provides pet food to food pantries so that people and their pets can stay together during difficult economic times, provides a humane education program for the schools, spays or neuters every animal that is adopted at the RVSPCA and has helped to launch a new, low-cost spay neuter clinic. But the RVSPCA cannot solve the problem of euthanasia at the Pound by itself. Everyone needs to help.

Why is there so much euthanasia in Roanoke and across the country? In a nutshell, the problem is that there aren't enough homes out there for all of the animals that are brought to the Pound. Cats and dogs breed quickly and the puppies and kittens just keep coming and coming and coming. The RVSPCA cannot find enough homes for all of the animals at the Pound; there are simply too many of them. Other rescue organizations help by taking animals from the Pound, but not in sufficient numbers to make a big difference.

So what is the solution? First and foremost, people need to spay or neuter their animals to prevent unwanted pregnancies. This is the humane answer to the shame of euthanasia. Half of the cats that are euthanized at the Pound are under six months old; their only crime was being born without a home waiting for them. This has to stop and spaying and neutering is the answer. Second, we have to find homes for the animals that are at the RVSPCA's adoption center; the faster we can find homes for these animals, the faster we can accept more animals from the Pound. Third, people must stop thinking of their pets as disposable and turning them in to the Pound or to the RVSPCA whenever those pets become inconvenient. Finally, we have to acknowledge that Roanoke (like many urban areas) has a pit bull problem and deal with it. Over a third of the dogs at the Pound that are euthanized are pit bulls. Most pit bulls are sweet, lovable dogs, but they generally do not do well in a confined environment such as a shelter. Furthermore, they are less popular with adoptive families than other types of dogs because of the stigma associated with pit bulls. Therefore, they do not move well at the RVSPCA's adoption center. Due to limited cage space, the RVSPCA can save more Pound animals when it takes animals

that are likely to be adopted quickly. Thus, most of the pit bulls at the Pound do not make it over to RVSPCA.

We will probably never completely solve the pet overpopulation problem but if the zeal and energy of the people railing about the level of euthanasia were devoted to promoting spaying and neutering, it could make a real difference. Please join the RVSPCA, as well as the other “no kill” organizations in the area, in fighting the problem of euthanasia of animals by spaying or neutering your pet, adopting an animal, microchipping your pet so that you can be contacted if your animal ends up getting lost, and recognizing your long term responsibilities as a pet owner. The animals are counting on us.

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