

Animal Welfare League of Kosciusko County

Senior Internship in Biology

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There are many ways to integrate knowledge learned in the classroom and application in the real world. When searching for a life career, the vast majority of college students bypass low income not-for-profit organizations and reach to achieve goals that will place them in higher income positions with for profit businesses and organizations. With graduation just around the corner, I plan on finding a job that will utilize all aspects of my knowledge base and drive me to continue to want to learn more. By working with the staff at the Animal Welfare League (AWL), I have been able to creatively develop and mold my combined skills not only from a general, liberal arts background, but from a deeper understanding of my biology, psychology, and teacher education viewpoints. The most difficult decisions that I faced while interning at the shelter were whether or not I thought a potential owner would humanely care for the animal that they wished to adopt and whether or not I thought an animal was able to be adopted because of its attitude or health. Euthanasia weighs heavy on many hearts and minds, but until pet owners care enough about their animals to protect them from contributing to the pet population problem, we will continue to see the need for animal shelters and the means to reduce the population to a sustainable level.

Initially established in 1986 as the Kosciusko County Humane Society, growth and reorganization have led to the development of the Animal Welfare League of Kosciusko County. The concern for neglected and suffering animals, a growing demand for education of pet populations, and the need for a facility willing to provide humane care and protection of pets pushed a few members of the community to take action. Just eight years ago, a revitalization occurred and AWL developed a strong connection with the community to prevent cruelty to animals by reporting abuse cases, relieve suffering of animals that have been seriously injured, abused, or neglected, and extend education about being a responsible pet owner. AWL is

currently operated by six paid employees and many more volunteers that have dedicated a great deal of time and money into maintaining the facility, educating the public, and adopting animals out to people that have agreed to care for and care about the well-being of their new pet. The shelter is not a no-kill facility, though they strive to achieve this goal in the future by purchasing a larger piece of land and developing a larger facility.

When it comes to cats and dogs, there are few Indiana laws that help in the fight against animal cruelty. Under Indiana law, cats and dogs are treated as livestock and therefore animal cruelty charges against a person come with a lesser consequence than that which is found in other states. State statute 35-46-3-12 “prohibits cruelty to an animal by knowingly or intentionally beating a vertebrate animal.” Statute 35-46-3-7 “prohibits recklessly, knowingly, or intentionally abandoning or neglecting a vertebrate animal in one’s custody.” Most penalties fall under a misdemeanor category with a maximum confinement of one year and a maximum \$5,000 fine. Any law enforcement officer or animal control officer has the authority to legally impound an animal/or animals without consent of the owner, if they have probable cause that the owner is neglecting or abusing the animal (“Fight Animal Cruelty”).

When calls come into the shelter to report an animal neglect, cruelty, or abandonment case, the staff informs the caller to contact the sheriff’s department and they send out one of their animal control officers to the location. There are many more people that take matters into their own hands and bring animals in that have supposedly been abandoned at their home or their neighbor’s home or is a neighborhood stray. Animals are never turned away from the shelter, but there are many people that lie about where the animal came from, whose it was, or why they were bringing it in and this makes it difficult for employees to understand the history of the animal. Because of the ever increasing number of animals that are abandoned or dropped at the

shelter, the director decided that a fee must be placed on animals that were released by their owners. This money, \$25 for the first animal and \$5 for each additional animal, helps cover the cost of vaccinations, medications, and food that the animal needs.

Because the county has cut funding from the shelter, AWL is no longer able to financially support their spay/neuter assistance program that helped families pay for the sterilization of their family pets. The majority of funding provided to the shelter now comes from community members that see a need to keep helpless animals from living a dangerous and unhappy life. AWL is also supported by many community businesses that donate food, treats, and bedding for the animals, and cleaning supplies for everyday tasks at the shelter. Some area businesses provide support through the creation of fundraisers. Every year there are holiday celebrations in which a photographer comes in for a holiday snap shot and pet owners can get their picture taken with their dressed up pet. Local veterinarians provide access to great locations in town for garage sales in which all items have been donated for the cause. Local businesses also have contributed the means for coupon books to be made and sold with all profits going to the shelter. Currently they are working with Gold Canyon Candle Company, to sell candles to the community and provide 40% of the profits to the shelter.

There are many organizations in the United States that are dedicated to promoting responsible pet ownership through action, service, and most importantly education. The American Society for the Prevention of Animal Cruelty (ASPCA), American Pet Association (APA), the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), American Humane, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have joined forces with shelters across the country to provide workshops and training sessions to inform directors and their employees on the best

ways to care for animals and provide adequate adoption screening to allow animals access to the most supportive and compassionate homes available.

Many people do not fully comprehend the responsibilities that come along getting a pet for their family. Parents often times think that their children want more responsibility, but realistically it takes many more skills and much more time than most people expect to care for an animal. Frequently neglect cases arise because of simple ignorance, usually on the part of the adults in the household, and the assumption that they know what is best for their animal. Animals often arrive at the shelter half starved and wondering if there is any food nearby, scared that someone will abuse them in some way, and sick because they were not routinely taken to the vet for check-ups. An annual rabies vaccine is mandatory for all dogs over the age of six months. Cats are exempt from this state statute, except within the city limits of Warsaw, where it is a local ordinance. Denying an animal of its basic needs through neglect, abandonment, or abuse is the key factor that inevitability of keeps shelters running.

Owners may not realize it, but they are liable for any and all things that their animals do because they are considered personal property. Indiana law 15-5-9-13 states that an owned animal will not be left to run at large and if your animal leaves your property you have broken the law. If your animal runs out in front of a vehicle on the road, you are liable for any damage that the animal does. If your dog visits the neighbor's yard and decides to "water" their flower bed, you are responsible for replacing the flowers. For these purposes and many more, shelters recognize that there needs to be a screening process in which shelter employees are able to get to know if a potential pet owner will meet the needs of the animal.

AWL requires prospective adopters to sign a contract showing that they are truly interested in the well-being of the animal. Adopters must agree that they can financially support

a pet and the care that it needs, will not abuse or mistreat their pet in any way, agree to obtain the proper immunizations for the pet, and take into consideration the risk of injury or loss of property that may result in the adoption of the animal. The number one problem that people have with adopting an animal is agreeing to spay or neuter it and it is AWL's policy to only adopt to homes that agree to do so. The facility can only hold so many animals and the employees do not wish to have to euthanize any more animals than they humanely have to. Many people are bothered by the fact that we have to euthanize animals and do not want to support a facility that does so. This problem often leads to purchasing an animal from a breeder, and, thereby, not helping to decrease pet overpopulation in shelters.

People interested in adopting a dog are often interested in a specific breed or size of animal and are often discouraged if we do not have what they want on the one day that they decide to pick out an animal. Many do not realize that through frequent visits to a shelter they are bound to find the animal that best fits their everyday lifestyle. If looking for a purebred, one can usually be placed on a waiting list in case the available breed comes up for adoption. Most shelter populations average 25-30% purebred species ("Adopting from an Animal Shelter").

Upon arrival, stray animals are vaccinated and wormed to prevent problems with other animals at the facility. AWL employees spend no less than five days getting to know an animal before they will put it up for adoption. During this time, the animals go through temperament testing and are screened for sound health. If animals are over the estimated age of six months, they are tested for diseases such as feline leukemia, AIDS, and heartworm. In 1997, shelters that reported their data about the animals entering and leaving their facility stated that 64% of animals entering shelters were euthanized ("Animal Shelter Euthanasia"). Statistics show that these numbers have decreased in the last five years to about 50% of the 6-8 million dogs and cats

entering shelters having to be euthanized (“Common Questions”). This occurs because irresponsible pet owners do not vaccinate, spay or neuter, or teach their animal basic temperament commands.

Euthanasia is a medical procedure that uses an anesthetic drug, sodium pentobarbital, to humanely and peacefully cause death of an animal. According to federal law, shelter employees must complete training and certification to be allowed access to these drugs because of the risk of their illegal distribution. As indicated by Miranda Van Doren, AWL shelter director, “Fatal-Plus” is the euthanasia drug of choice for shelters across the country. Miranda agrees with the AWL board of directors in that the shelter needs to stay open as long as there are homeless and abandoned animals to be fed, sheltered, and cared for in the community. The shelter’s goal is to educate the community about its animal overpopulation problem in an attempt to reduce the number of cats and dogs that are being abandoned, neglected, or abused.

My experiences with the shelter have been life altering, as I did not fully understand the need for euthanasia before spending time at the shelter. I now recognize that euthanasia by injection is the most humane method for putting an animal to sleep. The growing need for an educated human population grows with every scrawny cat that enters the shelter with a new litter of kittens needing to be put to sleep because the owner was dim-witted and let the cat run around the neighborhood without first having her spayed. The best thing I can do right now is to continue volunteering my time with the shelter and help responsible, caring people adopt lovable animals.

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