

Program Changes for the City of Chico Animal Services

Date: January 4, 2013

Effective Date: February 1, 2013

Introduction

Since the City of Chico resumed operations of the animal shelter in February of 2012, the euthanasia rate has decreased, the return to owner rate has increased, and the overall live release rate has increased for both dogs and cats. Although the number of cats entering the shelter has decreased in comparison to last year, the number of cats transferred to Butte Humane Society for adoption is far fewer in comparison to the number of cats BHS adopted out during the same time period last year. Chico Animal Services has been able to find homes for over 100 cats through adoption, but many adoptable cats remain in the shelter. The City of Chico Animal Shelter has limited resources in terms of staffing and space to provide adequate care and positive outcomes for the high volume of cats entering the facility, especially stray and un-owned “community” cats. In light of these challenges, it is particularly important to identify and invest in those programs that can be implemented successfully within current constraints, and discontinue programs and policies that do not provide a public benefit or a positive return on the community’s investment.

Overview

The goals of the City of Chico Animal Services:

1. Abide by all state and local regulations regarding the City’s obligations for control and care of companion animals,
2. Respond to and resolve nuisance complaints regarding animals,
3. Euthanize animals that are suffering or dangerous,
4. Enforce animal cruelty laws and provide temporary housing for animals seized in the course of an investigation or other law enforcement action,
5. Reunite lost pets with their owners,
6. Find new homes for healthy, behavioral sound animals,
7. Provide adequate care to maintain the health and welfare of animals in the shelter,
8. Mitigate companion animal overpopulation.

State and local regulations regarding animal control apply primarily to dogs, and to a lesser extent cats and other companion animals. The current policies allow immediate, unrestricted intake of all found, feral and unwanted dogs, cats and other companion animals, whether surrendered by their owner or found as a stray. *These policies meet or exceed state requirements* and more than fulfill the first two goals of the City’s sheltering program. The City has no obligation to take in and find homes for surrendered companion animals, *nor does it have a legal mandate to take in stray or feral cats.*

Suffering and dangerous animals are euthanized, and housing is provided for seized and safekeeping animals, meeting goals 3 and 4. For goals 5-8 however, the success rate diverges sharply between dogs and cats. The euthanasia rate for cats is 29% compared to 11% for dogs¹, the return to owner rate for cats is 5% compared to 63% for dogs, and the live release rate for cats is 65% compared to 92% for dogs. The length of stay for cats is much longer than for dogs, making cats more likely to become ill and subsequently be euthanized. In some cases, attempting to fulfill these goals through the sheltering program *may actually*

¹ Includes owner requested euthanasia. Statistics are for February through November, 2012

decrease the likelihood of cats being rehomed or reunited with their owners; increase the risk of illness and death; and use resources that reduce the overall ability of the shelter program to meet the needs of the community. Discontinuing aspects of the shelter program that are not serving either cats or the community would allow greater focus, and greater success, in other areas with more potential benefit.

- **Cats are more likely to be reunited with their owners if they are allowed to remain where they are rather than being admitted to the shelter.** In one study, *cats were 13 times more likely to be returned home by non-shelter means* (return on their own, found by neighbor) than by the owner calling or visiting the shelter². The time elapsed before an owner begins to look for a lost cat at the shelter usually exceeds the stray holding period (4 days), meaning the cat may be transferred, adopted or euthanized before the owner ever visits the shelter.
- **The risk of death is lower and the chance for adoption may be higher for stray cats not admitted to the shelter.** Surveys show more people get their cats as neighborhood strays (34%) than by adopting from a shelter (15%)³.
- **Fewer cats admitted to the shelter increases the care and health of those cats that are in the shelter, uses fewer resources, and reduces stress on staff in terms of having to care for and euthanize fewer cats.** This frees up staff for other duties and reduces staff turn-over. Adequate housing for all cats admitted to the shelter under current policies is not now available, and will not be available any time in the foreseeable future.
- **Healthy cats do not pose a human health risk and would be better off remaining where they are rather than being admitted to the shelter, particularly if they are feral, timid or otherwise unlikely to be adopted.** A six state study shows less than 1% of feral cats have health issues requiring euthanasia⁴, indicating access to adequate food and shelter. Studies have shown that up to one quarter of households in the US feed one or more cats they do not own⁵. *In order to reduce the current stray cat population, 50% of stray cats would need to be euthanized or 75% would need to be sterilized*⁶. The current program admits roughly 13% of the stray population⁷, and will never have a significant impact on the number of stray cats in the community. Current response to stray cats is complaint driven rather than targeted to focus on cats that present the greatest welfare, environmental or public health concerns. Removing cats creates a void that is filled by other cats, or by other species such as skunks or raccoons. Studies show that Trap-Neuter-Release is effective in stabilizing the cat population, reducing unwanted kittens, and eventually leads to a natural drop in the cat population.

Recommendations

1. Discontinue field pick-up of healthy cats, whether friendly or feral
 - Continue field pick-up of aggressive, injured, and sick cats
 - Discontinue field pick-up of healthy pregnant or nursing cats, or orphaned kittens
2. Discontinue intake of healthy, unidentified stray cats
 - Provide the public with alternative strategies to co-exist with stray cats as with wildlife
 - Remove food sources and block shelter if not desired
 - Use of wildlife deterrents – repellants, sprinklers, etc.
 - Use of physical deterrents – gravel, pavers, etc.

² Journal of American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA) 2002. 221(8): p.1136-8.

³ American Pet Products Manufacturer's Association survey (2005)

⁴ Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery, 2006. 8(4): p. 279-284.

⁵ JAVMA 2004. 225(9): p. 1354-60 and 2008. 232(8): p. 1159-67.

⁶ JAVMA 2004. 225(12): p. 1871-6 and 2005. 227(11): p. 1775-81

⁷ One "community" (stray or feral) cat for every six people in the community, per JAVMA 2004. 255(9): p. 1354-60.

- Remind public of benefits of cats (rodent control)
 - Provide responsible feeding and sheltering guidelines if cats are desired
 - Provide resources for low cost spay/neuter
 - Inform finders that stray cats are better off left where they are to be reunited with their owners
 - Provide finders with contact information for found animal listing services (Craigslist, newspapers, shelter Lost and Found Logs, website/message board, etc.)
 - Provide downloadable “Found” flyer on website
 - Encourage finder to bring cat to vet or shelter to be scanned for microchip
 - Encourage and support identification of cats
 - Low cost microchip clinics
 - Walk-in microchipping
 - Provide finder with information to rehome cat if owner not found
 - Provide finder with resources for low cost spay/neuter
3. Discontinue intake of trapped cats / implement Trap-Neuter-Release
 - Provide public alternative strategies to co-exist with stray/feral cats (see above under item 2)
 - Refer public to BHS, PAWS and Neighborhood Cat Advocates to provide low cost spay/neuter and TNR services
 - Advise public that all cats will be TNR
 4. Discontinue intake of surrendered cats
 1. BHS has agreed to handle all surrendered cats
 - CAS received 689 surrendered cats between Feb – Nov 2012
 - BHS transferred 684 cats between Feb – Nov 2012
 - Cats would go to BHS clinic/adoption center
 - This would eliminate over 1/3 of the cats currently entering the shelter
 - Cats are less likely to become ill from an extended stay and overcrowding while waiting for transfer
 - Casually fed cats would be considered a community cat, not owned
 5. Continue to accept all of the following cats:
 2. Cats with ID (tag or microchip) and hold while owner is notified
 3. All injured, sick, pregnant, and nursing cats, and orphaned kittens
 - Finder will be encouraged to foster pregnant and nursing cats and orphaned kittens
 - Use of volunteer foster homes until kittens are old enough to be adopted
 - TNR or adoption for mother cats
 - Injured or sick cats will be euthanized or treated and TNR or adopted
 - All Safekeeping cats
 - All cats for owner requested euthanasia for sick, injured or aggressive cats
 - Cats that are healthy and adoptable will be referred to BHS
 - All cats for Rabies observation

Since only 67 cats out of the 1823 cats impounded up until November were returned to their owners, there will be no significant impact on revenue. Rather there will be a significant savings as fewer cats will be vaccinated, wormed, treated for fleas, tested, fed, medicated and euthanized over the course of a year. Capture, transport, holding, lethal injection and disposal is time consuming and costly – both in lives and the emotional toll, and is highly ineffective. The saving realized in changing current policies can be used for more effective programs such as targeted TNR, low cost spay/neuter, adoption of rehabilitated animals, and public education.

The sheltering program will continue to meet or exceed state and local mandates, house confiscated and bite quarantine cats, and provide medical care or humane euthanasia for cats that are injured, ill, orphaned

or a danger to the public. Although initially there may be some public resistance to these changes, there is overwhelming support from the local animal welfare community. Communities including San Jose, Elk Grove and Sutter County have already implemented these changes with great success. The end result will be a more cost effective and humane program focused on those areas that can be executed well, while eliminating the programs that offer little or no benefit.

Strategies

1. Inform staff so they are prepared for the policy changes and they are able to:
 - Provide the public with information about the advantages of the new policies
 - Provide the public with alternative resources/solutions
 - Deal with difficult/upset customers
2. Have pamphlets and fact sheet available to give to the public
 - What to do About Stray Cats
 - Living with Neighborhood Cats
 - TNR
3. Update website
4. Create PSAs and Press Releases to inform the public of the new policy changes, the reasons behind the changes, and the benefits, and address common concerns
 - Print media?
 - Radio and TV interviews/spots
 - Release approximately two weeks prior to effective date
5. Develop resources for TNR
 - PAWS of Chico
 - Butte Humane Society
 - Neighborhood Cat Advocates
6. Develop volunteer program
 - Foster homes for orphaned kittens
 - Adoption volunteers
 - Community outreach/education