

Success in Santa Clara County

California shelter taps into the community to 'get a lot done with very little'

BY JAMES HETTINGER

Brigid Wasson, supervisor at the Santa Clara County animal shelter in California, snuggles with some terrier puppies. The shelter has a foster program to provide a safe haven for nursing puppies and kittens until they are old enough to be adopted.



The shelter serves the unincorporated portion of the county—a “pretty huge,” largely rural area that’s home to about 100,000 people, notes shelter supervisor Brigid Wasson. Since the shelter serves farm country, it’s sometimes called upon to house lost or abandoned horses, goats, sheep, and chickens, and the large ranches and farms provide prime turf for cats to mate. “People have these explosions of kittens out on the farm. ... Out here people are sort of used to having large numbers of cats, but they may not necessarily know about the resources for spaying and neutering,” Wasson says.

And the shelter faces what Escobar terms a “jurisdictional nightmare.” Within the county are incorporated towns that have their own shelters and fall outside the jurisdiction of the county’s animal care and control division. That creates some odd situations: The county shelter, which has four animal control officers and is located in the southern part of the county, serves areas that are 30 or 40 miles away, but located a stone’s throw from a city shelter. To further complicate matters, some cities have unincorporated pockets that are the county’s responsibility.

But despite getting some lousy cards, the county shelter hasn’t thrown them in and skulked away from the table. Instead, it’s parlayed its hand into an operation that’s saving lives in a big way. For 2011, the shelter—which takes in about 3,000 animals a year, split roughly equally between dogs and cats—placed 100 percent of its healthy animals, and the overall adoption and reclaim rate was 80 percent.

The shelter has enlisted donors who help cover shelter expenses, rescue groups that take difficult-to-place animals, and volunteers who help run the shelter and socialize dogs. “With the community’s involvement, I think we get a lot done with very little,” says Wasson.

If life were a poker game, you might say the County of Santa Clara Animal Shelter in San Martin, Calif., wasn’t exactly dealt a royal flush.

Built in the early 1970s, the shelter is described by those who run it as old and small. It has plumbing problems, electrical problems, and a leaky roof. The surgery area is small, the cat rooms have 2-by-2 cages that shelters typically don’t use anymore, and the building lacks good quarantine areas and the

kennel drains that would help control the spread of disease.

The facility uses residential laundry machines because it can’t support a commercial unit. The machines run for the whole day, often break down, and aren’t covered by warranty because their use by the shelter is considered a commercial application. “I’ve become an expert on the darn appliance repairs,” says Albert Escobar, the county’s animal control program manager.

[life preservers]

Reaching Out

When Wasson arrived in 2008, the Santa Clara County shelter's live release rate was hovering around 60 percent. "We had a few things going, but I started looking for things that could really improve" she says. "I think what really kicked it up a notch was engaging the community. ... They wanted to help; they just didn't know how. They were waiting for us to tell them what we need—whether it's volunteer hours, whether it's money, whether it's providing a foster home. So we reached out to the community and invited them to help us, and they responded."

The local newspaper, the *Gilroy Dispatch*, is a great ally for reaching the community, Wasson says. When the shelter needs foster homes or supplies, for example, she'll call the editor to encourage the paper to run a story, explaining that it will help the shelter and also make for interesting reading.

The shelter gets donations to cover medical care for special-needs animals that it wouldn't be able to afford otherwise. Donated funds also pay for food and supplement a low-cost spay/neuter program; the shelter has no clinic of its own, but it

partners with 14 local veterinarians.

The shelter's volunteer crew has mushroomed to about 50 people, and Wasson says it's now a challenge to keep it organized. She's designated "senior volunteers" who help her manage things, making schedules and training new people. Volunteers help keep kenneled dogs stimulated by taking them out for walks or playtime in the yard, and Escobar says they've been really helpful with socializing the animals to make them more adoptable.

Wasson has also focused on increasing adoptions for particular groups of animals, like Chihuahuas and other small dogs, by placing them through rescue groups or getting them



Kennel attendant LaVonne Gonzales delivers a neutered, ear-tipped, and vaccinated barn cat to his owner. Boosted by volunteers, the shelter's Barn Cat Spay/Neuter Outreach program has helped to substantially reduce cat intake and euthanasia.

last December resulted in the placement of 1,128 animals, including 171 from the county shelter.

The coalition is applying for a \$1 million grant from Maddie's Fund, a charitable foundation that aims to reduce euthanasia. Each organization reports its intake, adoption, and euthanasia statistics. If the coalition meets certain lifesaving criteria and gets the \$1 million, each member will be eligible for a part of it. "There's no better way to incentivize people than with large amounts of money," Wasson says.

Maddie's gave the Santa Clara shelter a \$20,000 grant in 2009 to start a return-to-owner program. The grant had to be approved by the county's board of supervisors, and then the shelter had to hire a marketing firm—both of which were long processes, Wasson says. But the program has recently improved the shelter's website and produced a rack card for local businesses and veterinarians' offices that lists tips for people who have lost pets.

The shelter has started a number of other lifesaving initiatives in recent years. In 2009, it joined five other local animal welfare organizations to form the WeCARE Coalition, a working alliance that aims to end the euthanasia of healthy or treatable dogs and cats in Santa Clara County by 2016. The coalition's "Home for the Holidays" adoption event

The RTO program is "kind of exciting for us," Wasson says, "because we real-

Animal Shelter	Address	Phone	Website
Comstock	Santa Clara County Animal Shelter	(408) 299-3333	www.sccacounty.org
San Jose	San Jose Animal Care Center	(408) 299-3333	www.sccacounty.org
Merced	Merced Valley Animal Control Services	(209) 385-1100	www.mercedcounty.ca.gov
Stanislaus	Stanislaus County Animal Services	(209) 385-1100	www.stanislauscounty.ca.gov
San Joaquin	San Joaquin County Animal Services	(209) 385-1100	www.sccacounty.org
Alameda	Alameda County Animal Services	(917) 277-1100	www.alamedacounty.org

A rack card distributed throughout the community promotes the return-to-owner program.

Power to (and from) the People

A common assumption in the sheltering world, says Brigid Wasson, supervisor at the Santa Clara County animal shelter, is that you need a lot of money to get your programs done. But she's found that "what you really need is good people."

One of Wasson's good people is Diana Rapa, who calls herself "a total sucker for one-eyed dogs." Also three-legged dogs, and dogs who need special surgeries.

When she decided two years ago to start a rescue group for special-needs dogs, Rapa consulted Wasson. Rapa dubbed her rescue the Perfect Dog, and began fostering and placing dogs who were longtime shelter residents or had behavioral or medical needs the shelter couldn't address.

Today, Rapa, whose group has foster homes throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, says her rescue is thriving, having placed about 100 dogs into new homes. Nearly all of the first 50 came from the Santa Clara County shelter, and Rapa has now branched out to work with other area shelters as well.

"They've been absolutely wonderful. ... They will reach out to me if there's a dog in need," Rapa says of Wasson and the county staff. "... I do my best to help them, because if it wasn't for Brigid, then my rescue never would have been started in the first place." After a hoarding case last year left the shelter with 80 cats, Rapa even took a couple of those.

The shelter's dedication and professionalism inspires that kind of loyalty. Animal Shelter Relief, another foster home-based Bay Area rescue, also stepped in to help with that hoarding case, and



came away marveling at the comprehensive efforts of Wasson and her staff and volunteers.

The shelter appeared to have a good plan in place for taking in the animals and arranging veterinary care, recalls Terry Marino, a foster volunteer. "I was immediately impressed by how hard they were working to help these animals, and help the person involved who was the hoarder," she adds. Annette Hogue, Animal Shelter Relief's foster care coordinator, recalls that the rescued cats were dirty and smelly, and required "more baths than I think any animal would ever want in their lives." Marino allowed the baths to take place in her own home. "You feel so good ... about what their shelter does, you really want to step in and help," says Hogue.

Volunteers have caught that spirit as well. Mary Inman, a retired human resources and management professional who lives on a small ranch a few minutes from the shelter, says she'd always wanted to volunteer, but feared it would be too sad. Early this year, she decided to just do it, and try her best to not get gloomy.

ized at some point that we were ignoring the obvious by just trying to place animals into new adoptive homes, when most of them actually already have an owner that we just haven't located. ... We'd rather find the original owner, and not make an assumption that they're not looking, or they don't care."

The shelter essentially mirrors national averages, with only 20 percent of stray dogs and 2 percent of stray cats getting reclaimed. The RTO program is new and hasn't produced results yet, but Wasson hopes it increases the reclaim rate and reduces intake by encouraging people toward preventative measures like ID tags and microchips. "Our big thing is, put some ID on this dog, and it won't go to the shelter," Escobar says. Donated funds helped the shelter buy scanners and laptop computers for its vehicles,



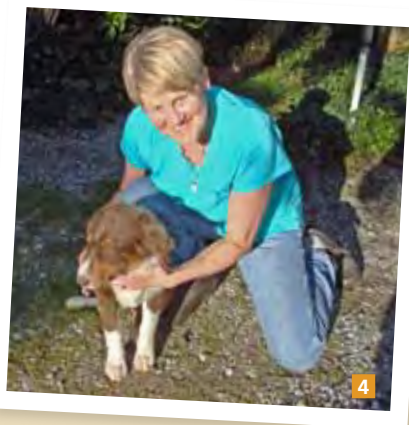
Veterinary technician Maureen O'Neill gives a medicated bath to a dog with a skin problem.

he adds, and officers are instructed to take identified animals back to their home rather than to the shelter.

What really boosted the shelter's live release rate up to 80 percent, Wasson explains, is the Barn Cat Spay/Neuter Outreach program aimed at eliminating those cat population explosions on farms.

Shelter staff discovered that rural landowners often didn't know how to solve their stray and feral cat problems. People might trap two or three cats during mating season and bring them to the shelter, Wasson says, "but then there would be 20 other cats on the property that were still reproducing." Dozens of properties in the county were producing 20 or 30 cats every year.

The shelter couldn't tackle the problem on its own, but after obtaining permission from property owners, volunteers worked



- 1 Volunteers like Courtney Hull, shown with a dog named Oso, help socialize the animals at the Santa Clara County animal shelter.
- 2 Volunteer Taylor Moiles evaluates Conan, one of the dogs at the shelter.
- 3 Volunteers Vicki Failing and Ramona Patterson work together to evaluate a dog named Rex.
- 4 Mary Inman, who coordinates the shelter's dog volunteers, says she strives to keep them engaged and motivated so they'll continue to volunteer. She and husband David Fanara recently adopted a new puppy, Casey, from the shelter.

She thought she'd work three hours a week (as the shelter's website suggests), but Wasson needed someone to organize the dog volunteers, and Inman agreed to give it a try. Today, she puts in 15 to 20 hours a week, and she's clearly enthusiastic. "We've made great strides, and we have a great team of volunteers now," Inman says, adding that it's exciting to see how quickly things have changed in a few months.

Inman has focused on improving the shelter's processes. She developed a form to keep better track of when dogs have gone out for ex-

ercise, and put together a calendar to better coordinate the volunteers' schedules. She sends out a weekly letter to the volunteers, featuring success stories that show how they're improving life for the dogs. "People need to know that they're making a difference, and that our being there matters," she says.

Inman's husband, David Fanara, began volunteering a few weeks after she did. He's a dog volunteer who specializes in the big breeds; he works with families interested in pit bulls or German shepherds, for example, spending a lot of time on evaluations and introductions in the shelter's play yards.

An ongoing problem, Inman notes, is that people return dogs who don't get along with their current pets, so she and Fanara are trying to make better matches by asking people about matters such as the size of their yard and the temperament of their existing pets. Fanara encourages people to bring their current dogs to the shelter for introductions, then advises them on what to do when they get home.

Fanara says he and Inman sometimes plan to go over to the shelter for an hour, but wind up staying for three. Why? Because they like it.

Walking dogs out on the trail, Fanara sometimes encounters people who say they've always thought about volunteering at the shelter but worried that it might be sad or that they'll be confined to scooping poop. He sees that as an opportunity to let people know that staff handles the poop scooping, and that volunteers can just play with dogs if that's what they want to do. "My pitch," he says, "is you just get to come down and have fun."



Because it serves a rural area, the Santa Clara County animal shelter regularly cares for abandoned or escaped horses. Farrier Linda Cowles, shown trimming the hooves of a neglected mare, volunteers to give horses the rehabilitative care they need.

with them to trap and sterilize the cats. Healthy feral cats were returned to the properties after their spay/neuter surgeries, while the friendlier cats were put up for adoption. Participating veterinarians sterilize a feral cat for a \$10 co-pay, but some volunteers consider even that fee a disincentive, so they'll pick up the tab themselves. "We've had volunteers who have paid hundreds of dollars of their own money just to see this program successful," Wasson says.

The shelter had a 15 percent reduction in cat intake after one year of the program, and cat euthanasia fell by a whopping 65 percent.

Wasson says the key was getting the buy-in of the property owners. "You can't make people accept the program," she notes, but you can help people understand that if they fix their cats, there will

be fewer cats around to, say, spray on the house or fight outside the bedroom window. Even people who were initially skeptical are now happy, she says, and they're no longer calling the shelter to complain.

People will happily embrace solutions that are accessible and affordable, Wasson says—and tapping into people's willingness to help animals has helped make the shelter in San Martin successful. "I've been in animal sheltering for 20 years now," she says, "and I've always heard, 'Oh, people are irresponsible. If only they would spay or neuter their animals, if only they'd do this.' It's like we've been putting the onus on the public, when actually the public, they have a desire to do the right thing as much as we do. They just either don't know, or they don't have the resources." **AS**