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HEADLINE: DEATH AT THE POUND

ANIMALS IN THE CHARLOTTE REGION ARE KILLED AT MORE THAN TWICE THE NATIONAL AVERAGE, AND LITTLE IS BEING DONE TO STEM THE PROBLEM

SERIES: Death at the Pound - First of three parts

BYLINE: MICHELLE CROUCH AND SCOTT DODD, STAFF WRITERS

BODY:

Dogs and cats are being killed in shelters throughout the Carolinas at rates that far surpass the average across the country.

Every year, more than 80,000 animals, many of them healthy and adoptable, are put down in Mecklenburg and surrounding counties. The regional rate of 37 animals euthanized per 1,000 people is more than double the national average of 16.

The doomed dogs and cats often spend their last days in crowded, stench-filled shelters that haven't adopted the best practices experts recommend. Most die in gas chambers, a method animal advocates consider outdated and potentially inhumane.

Not one county in the region has spent public money on the only method proven to reduce the number of unwanted animals killed in shelters: spaying and neutering pets to cut down on population growth.

Charlotte's shelter, the region's largest and best-funded, kills about 70 percent of the animals that enter its doors, all by lethal injection. And the numbers are going up, even as they drop around the country.

The percentage of animals killed in surrounding counties, usually by carbon monoxide, is even higher.

Caldwell killed 91 percent of dogs and cats at its shelter in 2002. Gaston killed 90 percent and Iredell 89 percent.

Rural Anson County, east of Union, kills almost every animal at its shelter. It has one animal control worker who has to shut down the facility every time he goes on a call.

In county after county, the explanation is the same: Officials say they don't have the money and can't make animals a priority at a time when growth is increasing the need for human services such as police and schools.

"There's only so much public money to go around," said Reggie Horton, Gaston's animal control administrator. "And by the time you get down to animal issues, the coffer's dry."

Experts say solving the problem isn't just a matter of more spending. What needs to change, they say, are attitudes and priorities - adopting methods proven to save animals rather than spending money to kill them. Other cities and states have saved both money and animal lives by investing in high-volume, low-cost spay-neuter programs, particularly those that target pets in low-income communities.

The South in general and rural communities in particular tend to lag behind urban areas and other parts of the country, in part because of an agricultural background that views animals as commodities, not companions.

"The attitude is: 'We kill animals. So what?' " said Bob Christiansen, an Atlanta author and animal population consultant.

The Observer found:

--All but two counties in the 15-county Charlotte region use carbon monoxide to kill animals, even though it's discouraged by national animal welfare groups. Though experts say carbon monoxide is painless if used correctly, the Carolinas require no training for the shelter workers who administer the gas, and some animals have to be gassed twice because it doesn't always kill the first time.

--More than half the counties spend less than \$4 per person on animal control, which is the minimum recommended by the International City/County Management Association to finance an adequate program. The lack of spending - as low as \$1.42 per person in Anson and \$2.80 in Catawba - makes it difficult for shelters to provide adequate care.

--Shelters are frequently overcrowded, and some are rundown and disease-ridden. The Union shelter is so rodent-infested, its supervisor called it "a giant mouse heaven." Even the best shelters aren't large enough to handle all the animals that come in daily.

--Many counties in the region don't follow the best practices recommended by national groups, including sterilizing all animals before they're adopted and vaccinating animals in shelters to prevent disease outbreaks. The majority of Charlotte-area counties don't require owners to license their pets, a basic step used by many communities nationally to track the animal population and raise money for preventative programs.

Conditions in the Charlotte region are reflected across the Carolinas. Statewide, between 35 and 40 animals per 1,000 people are killed in North Carolina, compared with the national average of 16, according to a publication that tracks such figures. South Carolina does not compile statewide numbers.

Neither state regulates county-operated shelters, although private N.C. facilities must be registered and inspected. And state officials say they know of no Carolinas county that requires owners without a breeding permit to neuter their pets, as some communities elsewhere do to keep down population growth.

"The counties don't want state government involved," said Dr. Charles Kirkland, the director of animal health programs in the N.C. state veterinarian's office. "At the same time, there need to be some sort of standards."

The N.C. General Assembly created a commission last fall, Kirkland said, to examine the state's animal welfare laws and suggest changes.

So far, it hasn't met.

'Horrible way to die'

The majority of counties in the Carolinas use gas to kill most animals - a method banned by at least two states, Maryland and California.

In the Charlotte region, only Mecklenburg and Burke counties always use lethal injection. When Sheriff John McDevitt took over Burke's animal control in 2001, he was so opposed to the gas chamber that he had it knocked down with a sledge hammer.

"It's a horrible way to die," he said. "You gas them, then you listen to them howl and bark."

Officials in other counties say they want to be humane. They put down young and sick animals by lethal injection. But they say they can't afford to use that method every time. It's more expensive, requiring more time and at least two people. One must be a trained technician to handle the drugs.

Some animal welfare groups object to gas because it takes longer to work - several minutes, as opposed to the usual five to 20 seconds for injection - and is more subject to misuse.

"If it's done correctly, according to the proper guidelines, it is painless," said Kirkland, with the N.C. state vet's office. "They just lie down and go to sleep."

But the Carolinas don't require animal control workers to undergo training before administering the gas, even though some counties do it anyway.

National groups offer standards for using gas, but not all counties follow them. Often, animals are loaded into cages or a chamber together, where they can fight and hurt one another as they die. Recommendations say to keep animals separate and avoid crowding.

"You put a bunch of strange dogs or puppies together," Kirkland said, "they're going to be scrambling all over each other."

Cabarrus puts several animals in a cage together - separated by species - and rolls them into the gas chamber. In Union, as many as 10 dogs are gassed together in a 4-by-4-foot steel container. It replaced a cinder-block chamber that leaked, causing some animals to survive the gassing.

Stanly County still has that problem. "After you bring them out, some of them aren't all down," said animal control officer Randy Palmer, who has had the job for 25 years. "Sometimes we have to put them back in."

With lethal injection, animals are held by technicians who can comfort them as they die and feel their heartbeats fade.

"The one kindness you can give an animal that's had a rough life is that final little scratch behind the ear and a very quick death," said Martha Armstrong of the Humane Society of the United States. "You can't do that in a carbon monoxide chamber."

Union shelter worker Chuck Davis said it's tough to wake up knowing he'll have to kill six or seven puppies that day. He and other workers console each other by saying the dogs are going to a better place.

"I'm going to hell," he said, "cause they're going to heaven."

Aging and overcrowded

Many shelters are old and rundown, and even new ones aren't large enough to handle all the lost and stray animals, or pets surrendered by owners who don't want them anymore.

In Union, flies land on bags of donated dog food, which the shelter depends on because it gets only \$300 to \$400 from the county budget each year to feed up to 8,000 animals.

The shelter has one room with air conditioning. Cats are housed there.

"It's kind of ironic to me that the Health Department runs the shelter, but it certainly wouldn't pass any health inspection," said Union humane society president Cindy Poppino.

Gaston has so many animals right now, during the breeding season, that some kittens are being housed temporarily in cages outside the main building.

Several counties, including Lincoln, Caldwell, Cabarrus and Alexander, recently built new shelters. Charlotte-Mecklenburg opened a new facility in 1993.

Even those can't keep up with the growing animal population. They often house more than they were built to hold.

Overcrowded conditions allow disease to spread easily, and only a few counties vaccinate every animal that comes in to prevent full-scale outbreaks.

Teri McAllister, president of Recycled Pets Inc. in York County, S.C., said many animals the group rescues from the shelter are sick. The county often puts as many as eight dogs in 8-by-8-foot pens at its 25-year-old pound, which is scheduled to be replaced next summer.

Kristin Baidel of York adopted an orange-striped kitten there last month. Her daughters named it Tigger.

Eight days later, Tigger died of panleukopenia, a highly contagious disease that spreads when animals are crammed together.

"My little girls wanted to know where their cat went," Baidel said. "I would never go back there."

Underfunded, overwhelmed

Animal shelters, like everything else in tough budget times, face cutbacks and shortages.

A decade ago, Gaston had 25 animal control employees. Now that's down to 23, and two positions remain open, even as the county's population grows and it copes with a rabies epidemic.

It was so bad last summer, when a flood of emergency calls came in, that the department often had to put off dealing with strays, sometimes for as long as three months, said Horton, the animal control administrator.

"Euthanasia numbers are down because total impoundment numbers are down," he said. "We just don't have the people out there doing the job."

Union's animal control didn't receive any new staff positions between 2000 and 2002, supervisor Susan Marsh said - even though officers responded to 2,394 more calls in 2002, a 23 percent increase.

That means tasks that could save more animals have been pushed to the side. For example, the shelter hasn't updated pictures on its adoption Web site for six months. The Union humane society, which tries to fill the gaps, paid for catch poles that the city of

Monroe's animal control officers use to snag strays.

Often, it takes a crisis for political leaders to pay attention. In Lincoln County four years ago, deputies shot 33 dogs they were rounding up at the home of a man who'd gone to the hospital.

It generated outrage, but also change.

The sheriff's office revamped its animal control bureau, providing new training and procedures. It finally moved out of a small concrete facility built in the 1940s - which had only a frayed tarp blocking the euthanasia area from view.

In Burke, Sheriff McDevitt said he begged for years for money to increase his staff. But it wasn't until a dog bit a little girl that officials agreed to double his officers to four.

Attitudes hinder change

While a lack of resources plays a big part in why so many animals die in the Carolinas, the problem is far larger.

Rural residents tend to have different views and values when it comes to dogs and cats, animal control officers and humane society leaders say.

"People think every female dog should have her puppies, and every male dog should keep his testicles," said Susan Summerall, a leader with the S.C. Animal Care and Control Association. "That's the unfortunate way of life in the South."

She said it's no surprise that the Carolinas kill more animals than elsewhere. Many rural S.C. counties didn't even create animal control bureaus until the 1970s, she said. In other parts of the country, bureaus have been around for more than a century, and have had time to change attitudes and adopt better practices.

Rural counties face resistance to methods commonly used in other places to help control the animal population and reduce breeding, such as leash and licensing laws and spaying and neutering programs.

"They're operating with the kind of dog regulation that existed right after the Civil War," said Merritt Clifton, a national pet population expert. "It's a matter of deciding that they want to come into the 21st century."

Iredell officials actually did away with the county's licensing program about eight years ago because the county didn't have the staff to enforce it. Residents who paid for the licenses lobbied to have the law repealed because so few people were following it.

The fee was \$5.

Spay-neuter efforts stalled

Charlotte-area officials don't devote public money to spaying and neutering, which has cut kill rates dramatically elsewhere in the country. Other cities and states provide vouchers to poor residents, pay for sterilization clinics and engage in large-scale public education campaigns.

In the Charlotte region, humane societies, concerned veterinarians and other groups provide some low-cost options. But counties have left the job up to those private groups, or they charge people who want to adopt pets for the cost of sterilizing them.

Most counties require animals adopted from their shelters to be neutered, but many don't perform the operation themselves. They require new pet owners to sign contracts pledging to do the job at a private vet, but officials often don't have the legal authority or manpower to follow up.

Statewide spay-neuter efforts have had little impact, as well. In 2001, N.C. lawmakers created a fund to reimburse counties that provide those services to low-income residents.

But resistance from the N.C. Veterinary Medical Association weakened the proposed law, legislators say. Instead of paying for those programs by collecting an extra 50 cents from everyone who bought a rabies tag, the state created a separate tag that pet owners had to choose to buy. And animal advocates say vets, who sell the tags, don't promote them.

The program, which also gets money from special vehicle license plates, raised about \$40,000 last year. Only four counties have applied for a share of the money - none from the Charlotte region - because it isn't enough to make a difference, officials say.

"Vets have hobbled this program from the very beginning," said N.C. Sen. Ellie Kinnaird, D-Orange, who sponsored the legislation. "It's not working the way we intended it to. It's been very disappointing."

Kinnaird has introduced a new bill that would revive the original plan, but vets are already lining up against it. They say the extra 50 cents could discourage people from getting rabies vaccinations, which are required by law.

"As much as we can solve this problem privately, we should do that," said Dr. Sarah Brown, a leader of the vet association. "Government intervention can't solve everything."

Shelter workers who deal with the results of animal overpopulation have their share of horror stories. They're about people, not pets.

Like the Catawba County family that drops off a litter of pit bull puppies at least three times a year to be killed - but won't agree to have the dogs neutered.

Or the Union County woman who brought in puppies to be killed, then tried to adopt a cat.

"Sometimes you would like to put to sleep some of the people that bring animals in," said Davis, a shelter worker.

"They are idiots."

-- STAFF WRITERS KYTJA WEIR, JAIME LEVY, HANNAH MITCHELL AND KATHRYN WELLIN CONTRIBUTED TO THIS REPORT.

About This Series

TODAY

More than 80,000 unwanted dogs and cats were killed last year in animal shelters across the Charlotte region. That's more than double the national average of animals killed per 1,000 people.

Most die in gas chambers, a method animal welfare groups consider outdated and that at least two states prohibit. Neither North Carolina nor South Carolina requires training for shelter workers who administer the gas, or regulates and inspects county-owned facilities, which are often crowded and underfunded.

Local governments plead that their budgets can barely meet all the needs of their fast-growing human populations, much less do better by animals. Mecklenburg and surrounding counties now spend no public money on spaying and neutering programs that could help reduce the animal population and have proved cost-effective in other places.

Coming Monday

Charlotte is killing more animals at its shelter even as other cities around the country cut their death rates.

Coming Tuesday

The Humane Society of Charlotte, the area's largest animal welfare group, faces questions about how it uses its resources.

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NOTES: Graphic "County-by-County Kill Rates", "Money for Animal Control", "Best Practices in Animal Control", and "How to Help Animals Needing a Home" not in database; please see microfilm.

GRAPHIC: GRAPHIC:4 PHOTO:8;

1. TODD SUMLIN - STAFF PHOTOS. A veterinarian technician comforts a dying kitten, waiting as a lethal dose of poison takes effect. The procedure is repeated dozens of times a day at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg animal shelter. The golden-brown dog shown

above spent six days at the shelter awaiting his fate. See his story on Page 10A.; 2. TODD SUMLIN - STAFF PHOTO. Fluffy came to the Charlotte animal shelter abused and neglected. His chain had cut into his neck; he was 40 pounds underweight and covered with mats of hair. The shelter workers decided to save him, nursing him back to health and hoping someone would take him home. It's a way to improve morale and deal with the strain of their jobs.; 3. Siberian Husky, killed; 4. Collie mix, killed; 5. Tabby kittens, killed; 6. Lab, chow mix, killed; 7. Laborador Retriever, returned to owner; 8. Siamese-mix kitten, Adopted

LOAD-DATE: July 15, 2003
