

Chapter 5

Empowering Animal Field Services to be More Community-Focused

Summary of problems to address

Many of today's most successful animal control agencies have recognized that the methods and practices that have been utilized by animal control over the past several decades have fallen short of their goals. Historically, agencies relied on issuing citations, seizing and impounding animals and focusing their efforts and resources on "enforcing the law. They realized that citations rarely changed behavior and often disproportionately impacted marginalized communities. People simply went out and replaced seized animals.

In response, agencies adopted a more community-oriented way of addressing these issues. Similar to the law enforcement approach known as community policing, field officers began working with residents to find long-term, cost-effective solutions to the problems they were facing. The result was amazing: less animals clogged up the shelter system, resulting in less animals being euthanized, and saving tax dollars as well. An added plus was this allowed for shelter staff to have more time to dedicate resources for those animals that were truly in need and help keep families and pets together. Some field officers would help distribute pet food from pet food pantries, other would help mend fences. This garnered unprecedented community support and appreciation. However, some agencies that attempted to implement this new philosophy encountered legal obstacles that prevented them from fully implementing this shift.

Most common restrictions

The most common restriction field officers face is simply that the word “shall” appears in many animal control ordinances. By changing “shall” to “may” it gives the officer the discretion as to whether a particular situation warrants impoundment and citation or if the officer can resolve the issue by working with the pet owner to rectify the cause of the infraction. Often, dogs will escape from a yard due to a broken fence that the owner has tried to repair but doesn’t have the knowledge or resources to do.

Historically, the officer would impound the animal and issue a citation, along with expensive reclaim fees. Unfortunately, the cost to fix the fence was often outside the owner’s financial means; the result is the pet is added to an overburdened shelter system and often resulted in the animal being euthanized. Bringing animals into the shelter is costly in staff time, pet food, veterinary care and possible euthanasia and body disposal, not to mention the emotional costs to the staff, which can lead to higher than necessary turnover (and the associated costs).

For instance, Baytown Texas’ ordinance requires an officer to impound all dogs found running at large to the county shelter¹. This prohibits officers from returning the dog to the owner in the field without impoundment even if the dog has identification such as an ID tag or microchip.

Chapter 14 - ANIMALS Sec. 14-5. - Running at large.

“...It shall be the duty of every animal control officer to apprehend any dog found running at large and to impound such dog at the city animal shelter.”

An agency should have the discretion to waive fees for good cause. All too often these fees are too prohibitive for many people, which forces pet owners to forego reclaiming their pet. Requiring sterilization prior to release and/or mandatory licensing and vaccinations prior to release prevents many agencies from conducting a return-to-owner while still in the field. An ideal situation would be to offer a low or no-cost option for these services with the expectation that the owner will comply at a later date.

A new trend that has proven to be successful is the use of finders of stray animals as temporary fosters who assist the agency in finding the owners. The great majority of stray animals are found within their own neighborhood. By removing the animal from the area and bringing them into the shelter, that oftentimes can be miles or even hours away, hampers reunifications. Additionally, many people lack access to transportation or the scheduling flexibility to get to the shelter during business hours. Local ordinances like Brownsville’s prohibit this activity and add to an overburdened shelter system.

Instead, finders of stray animals that are willing should notify animal control with all of the identifying information, walk the neighborhood and talk to residents about potential owners, visit local social media pages, and post pictures and search for lost pet notices.

Officers in the field should also be allowed and even required to do the same when a stray animal is found that is neither sick or injured and poses no threat to public safety. More agencies are taking steps like this and seeing the

numbers of animals being found being returned home without having to be impounded dramatically increase. As the number of animals being microchipped in the United States continues to grow, all field officers should have the ability to scan every animal they encounter for a microchip prior to impoundment. A good example of this can be found in Jacksonville Florida’s ordinances:

§432.601. An animal control officer is authorized to capture and impound, in a place maintained or designated for that purpose, any animal that is stray, at-large or as otherwise authorized by this Chapter...

§462.602. Upon impounding an animal that is licensed, tagged, or otherwise identifiable through microchip or tattoo, ACPS shall promptly notify the owner by telephone or mail unless the owner has been informed directly or via note left on property/residence by an officer or employee of ACPS. Such notice shall advise the owner of the period for impoundment. *ACPS, at its discretion, may make a reasonable inquiry in the immediate vicinity in which a stray animal is picked up in order to locate the owner, if any, of a stray animal.*

Policy Recommendations

To encourage a more community-based approach to animal control, field officers should be given specific training related to community engagement similar to the education traditional police officers receive in community policing. Officers should be required to attend monthly community meetings and should be conducting outreach events such as tabling at local health fairs and shelter vaccination clinics. Officers should also receive formalized training in conflict resolution and mediation techniques as this already a critical component to the duties.

In order to perform these duties, a reduction in overall call volume is needed. Far too often agencies are required to respond to issues that are outside their statutory obligations as a matter of policy.

Responding to nuisance wildlife calls is a waste of a field officer’s time and tax dollars. Wildlife calls should only be prioritized if there is a bite or an injured wild animal. Humane methods of conflict mitigation have proven much more successful and can increase community goodwill toward the agency.

Conclusion

Animal control is evolving. Field officers across the country are changing the way they do their jobs; learning what works and what doesn’t and knowing how to solve problems without alienating community members. Municipal lawyers should reexamine their city’s ordinances to ensure they follow the tenets of community policing, allow for lifesaving and are cognizant of removing any language that has a disparate impact on marginalized communities.

Notes

1. At the time of this writing this ordinance is under consideration for amendment by the county officials.