Animal control director making strides

Virginia Annable   Jul 7, 2018

DAVID PREWITT | NEWS-TOPIC This is one of many kittens and cats up for adoption at the Caldwell County Animal Control shelter in Lenoir.

Mimi, a 4-week-old black labrador retriever, came to the Caldwell County Animal Control Shelter with a bloody, 3-inch gash on her head. Someone had hit her with a sharp object, and it didn't look like she would live.

In the past, it might have cost hundreds of dollars to treat Mimi, including vaccinations, testing for diseases, and surgery by an outside veterinarian. Under Jenna Mullinax, who became animal control director in December, Mimi's path to recovery was far cheaper and easier. Testing and

vaccination were done at the shelter by animal control employees, and a volunteer veterinarian put 12 stitches to close the gash in her head.

Now 12 weeks old, Mimi runs and plays with the other dogs and is up for adoption. She has a better chance than she would have a year ago. In the past seven months adoptions have gone up and euthanizations have gone down.

"Animals all deserve a good life. That's what the animal shelter is for, giving animals a chance," Mullinax said.

Mullinax has focused on improving operations at the shelter, changing how the animals are treated for diseases and altering the culture surrounding the shelter, so that people see it as more than just a place where animals are euthanized.

"The culture really has to change, and it takes more than just animal control, it takes a community. … I want everyone to see animals as individuals, and to care about them," she said.

The animal control shelter has been repeatedly cited by state officials for unacceptable conditions, including peeling paint and cracked floors, both of which can harbor germs, since 2006. In May, Mullinax limited services for weeks to create time for repairs and cleaning required by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture.

Mullinax has instituted strict cleaning schedules. The kennels are washed twice a day with better and safer chemicals, she said, and air vents, which can harbor disease when clogged with animal hair and dust, are regularly cleaned.

"It's all about reducing the spread of diseases within the shelter," Mullinax said.

Last November, when the shelter had been without a director for nearly four months, 20 animals being kept at the shelter died, some because of old age or injuries, but most due to the spread of disease. This April, one animal died in the shelter, according to the monthly report, and Mullinax said no animals died in the shelter in June, a fact she's proud to share.

That number can be attributed to the changes Mullinax has made to cleaning as well as animal medical treatment. Mullinax and her staff have learned to vaccinate animals themselves, test animals for illnesses and treat most sicknesses and minor injuries in the shelter, making treatment

less expensive and quicker.

Many of those changes came with the help of Dr. John Thuss, a veterinarian and former county commissioner.

When Thuss first met Mullinax, he could tell she loved animals, he said, so he decided to help. He's the one who taught the staff how to vaccinate animals, test blood and stool using a microscope, recognize when something is wrong with an animal and then what to do. If an animal comes in with a more serious problem, such as Mimi's head wound, he's on call to handle it.

Having staff vaccinate animals when they arrive is much less expensive than sending them to a veterinarian and keeps all the animals safe from disease. Healthy animals are more attractive to potential adopters, which is one reason adoptions have doubled under Mullinax while the number of animals put down has been halved.

By April, 162 animals had been adopted and 240 put down. At the same time last year, only 92 had been adopted and 498 had been euthanized.

When animals are put down now, it often is either because the owner requested it or the animal is too sick to live, she said.

Getting all the changes in place was no easy task. When Mullinax started implementing new procedures, three of four animal control officers quit, two in February and one in March.

Having three employees quit was hard, Mullinax said, but since then her new staff has been able to make the changes she wants, including in animal control's relationship with the public. One of her officers has been using Facebook to promote dogs and cats available for adoption. Last month, the shelter had a meet-and-greet for the public to meet the staff and learn more about animal control.

"It's so important to build a relationship with the community, so we can change the culture around animals," she said.

She wants to use the relationship to teach people how to care for animals so there are fewer abandoned and to show she's willing to help.

"We might not always be able to do something, but I'm willing to work with the public," she said. "If your dog needs a collar, I'll get you one. If you're not sure what to feed your cat, I'll teach you."

Mullinax also joined multiple animal services groups, like the North Carolina Animal Federation, which help organizations network and provide professional development, and has started representing Caldwell County at conferences, where she's learning from officials in other counties.

"There's no reason we can't be a premier, model animal shelter," she said.

The next big thing for her is a new animal shelter, which the county has hired an architect to design. Mullinax has big plans for it, such as multiple quarantine rooms, an operation room to spay and neuter animals, and a space for people to visit with animals, but for now she's happy making small changes.

"I'm really excited for all the changes. I've changed a lot but it's for the greater good," she said. "We might not be able to be no-kill, but that doesn't mean we can't be good at what we do."

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