

Sad job: destroying unwanted animals

By Suzie Rollins Slinger
staff writer

David Wills wants to change the state's pet owning system. Because of the animal overpopulation problem, he advocates forced sterilization.

Wills, director of the Michigan Humane Society, said, "Owning an animal should be a privilege, not a right."

"We need stronger controls on animal population. If a person wants to breed animals, then they should be licensed and pay for it. Otherwise, the animals should be sterilized."

MORE THAN 500,000 surplus animals are destroyed each year in Michigan, he said.

"People come in all the time giving us dogs and cats that 'didn't work out' or they 'couldn't afford' or 'don't need' all of the time," Wills said.

"We just don't have the space for all of them, and we certainly can't place them all, so we have to get rid of them in the most humane way."

"We're frustrated — that's for sure."

THE SOCIETY offers low-cost sterilization for all animals, regardless of whether they've been purchased there.

All pets adopted at the shelter are neutered or spayed before being turned over to new owners.

Wills describes the Michigan Humane Society — which has branches in Detroit, Westland and Auburn Heights — as a full-service shelter. It differs from most smaller shelters which are adoption centers only.

It is a non-profit, private organization, existing on donations. Its annual budgets are \$1.2-\$1.5 million.

More than 73,000 animals wind up in one of the three shelters annually. Only 15,000 are placed in homes.

IN ADDITION to adoption services, the Michigan Humane Society has a full-time lawyer investigating cruelty cases; a seven-day-a-week, 24-hour-a-day animal rescue ambulance; education classes; pet care counseling; clinical services; and wildlife rehabilitation.

Seven full-time veterinarians are employed at the shelter.

"Our clinics are full service. We provide anything from shots to advanced surgery. But we will not perform cosmetic surgery on animals, such as ear cropping, tail docking or declawing," Wills explained.

It costs the shelter between \$7 and \$10 a day to house animals.

PUTTING ANIMALS to sleep is torment for Wills. But hundreds of sick and disabled animals are dropped at the shelter annually and vets have to make decisions.

Four out of five dropped off never find a home.

"Humane death is better than suffering. We're in a real hot bed here, but there's not much else we can do. We can't keep them all," he said.

Wills recalled a 10-year-old pregnant St. Bernard with distemper being brought in by a family who wanted her and the puppies saved. The family found the dog, but didn't want the puppies.

"After two hours of explaining that the dog and the pups would have distemper and die soon, they let us put the dog to sleep rather than putting her through the pain of having pups," Wills remembered.

"It's a frustrating, emotional business."

INVESTIGATING animal cruelty complaints is a steady job at the Humane Society.

Trained investigators handle more than 3,000 complaints a year. They prosecute offenders, and if they have placed a pet in a home where owners turn out to be abusers, they remove the pet.

"We found a Rochester man harboring a 10-month-old cougar, and we got it away from him. We also fight the DNR (Michigan Department of Natural Resources) on issues," Wills said.



BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Eric Early of Tabster Elementary School, Plymouth, got a taste of the loving dogs and cats at the Michigan Humane Society's Westland Branch. Hundreds of unwanted animals arrive at the shelter daily needing homes, but few find friends like Eric.

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