

MICHIGAN HUMANE SOCIETY

Killing with kindness takes a toll

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The Michigan Humane Society is an organization in conflict with itself.

The staff love animals, especially dogs and cats, and want to find homes for all.

Yet they kill, by lethal injection, some 30,000 animals a year and place only 10,000 in homes. Three out of five animals that enter the shelter alive come out dead.

The Humane Society has difficulty retaining employees who have direct contact with the animals because it's heart-breaking to see so many animals killed.

"The turnover is very high," said Lisa Acho, one of the society's three public relations specialists. "It's a low-paying job, and it's very stressful. No one is in it for the money."

Even the PR people aren't immune. "I'm taking (the animals') pictures and putting them in the paper, and I come back the next day and they're put to sleep," Acho said. "You see these animals getting adopted, and it almost makes you for it."

Yet employees and volunteers like Northville resident Mary Anne Callahan feel like they're doing God's work.

"More people need to know what is going on here and how much good is going on," Callahan said. "We're giving love and attention to animals. We're giving them a second chance."

Founded in 1877, the Michigan Humane Society takes in more animals than any other shelter in the state. The society's three shelters in Westland, Rochester Hills and Detroit will accept any animal for any reason, unlike limited admission shelters that are often full and must turn people away.

The Michigan Animal Rescue League of Pontiac euthanizes animals only when there's a temperament or health problem. Rescue League cages are full, and people with unwanted pets are frequently turned away. Nevertheless, Rescue League Manager Kayla Allen praises the Humane Society for its open admissions and liberal euthanasia policy. "There will be no criticism for what they're doing from our end," she said. "We're a fan of the Michigan Humane Society."

Micki Main, the manager of the Humane Society's Westland shelter, said



STAFF PHOTO BY PETER WILLIAMS

Sad goodbye: Jeff Wallis takes in a sick dog to be euthanized.

limited-admission shelters solve no problems by sparing the needle. "They're not getting to the issue," she said. "They're just wanting their hands off it. They're unrealistic about what they're doing."

The Humane Society cages are usually filled, too. The Westland shelter has an average daily population of 250 animals. But animals who have been there the longest, or are judged least adoptable, are killed to make room for more. Since the Humane Society's doors are open to all animals, it often has to kill one to make room for another.

Acho is an animal lover, owns two cats and decorates her office with cat and dog pictures. But she "would rather take in an animal and have it put to sleep than turn them away."

Operations Director David Williams feels the same way. "The reality is there are not enough homes and too many animals," he said. Better that unwanted animals are euthanized at the Humane Society than hit by cars, used as bait for fighting dogs or end up in a laboratory.

Some animals that come to the society's shelters are killed right away. These are the biters, the trained fighting

dogs, the seriously ill, the cats that won't use a litter box. The Humane Society's rationale is that cage space is best reserved for animals who have the best chance of being adopted.

There is no set time limit after which all animals are killed. As of June 18, the Westland shelter had three cats that had been there five weeks.

The animals are dispatched with a shot of sodium pentobarbital. "It's like getting an overdose of an anesthetic," Acho said.

Workers who administer the shots have the worst jobs in the place. "It's very stressful," Acho said. "It takes a lot out of you."

The corpses are stored in the "cooler" and ultimately hauled away and cremated en masse.

Restrictions lifted

The Humane Society has sometimes been criticized for excessive selectivity in choosing adoptive families.

But some restrictions have been lifted in the interest of adopting more animals and killing less.

The society used to refuse adoptions if

the prospective owner said he would have a cat declawed or use a dog for hunting. But these deal-breakers have been dropped. "We'd rather see a cat adopted and declawed than end up in our cooler," Acho said.

Still, there are certain things one can say that will turn the Humane Society off on a proposed adoption. Acho won't say what those red flags are. "If too many people know of our policies they can mold their answers," she said.

Occasionally, people who want to buy an animal are turned away, but Acho characterized it as "pretty rare."

People surrendering animals to the Humane Society are asked if the pet has behavioral problems but often avoid telling the truth about it, Acho said. "They're afraid the animal will be euthanized. (And) they're hurting other animals by doing that."

Although many of the Humane Society's animals are turned in by owners, a good deal are stray and abused animals picked up by local authorities.

The Humane Society's Animal Rescue Division takes in about 6,000 stray and injured animals a year. If they are seriously injured and in pain, the animals are quickly dispatched. Animals with lesser injuries are treated and held for at least four days. Many of the strays are brought in by area police departments. Canton Township, for example, contracts with Critter Control to pick up strays. Critter Control takes them to the Westland shelter, Acho said.

The Cruelty Investigation Division responded to 4,000 calls in 1998 and removed 1,000 animals from bad situations.

The Detroit police usually call the Humane Society when they break up a dog fight or raid a crack house.

Just last April the society confiscated 21 trained fighting dogs, two alligators and two pythons in one raid. The Humane Society received 316 dog fight complaints last year and euthanized 160 pit bulls, Acho said.

Most people in the unwanted pet business blame pet owners who let their pets reproduce and pet owners who don't take the time to correct behavioral problems.



Cute kiddy: Marcus Sawyer, Holly Sawyer (middle), and Marina Sawyer get a chance to pet a kitten up for adoption.

20,000 lethal injections a year

In 1997, the MHS took in 63,048 animals. Of that number, 9,745 were "adopted," and 38,219 were killed. Some 7,084 were returned to their owners (as in the case of strays that were picked up) or released in the wild (the squirrels and birds).

In 1998, the MHS took in 49,985 animals. Of that number, 10,595 were adopted, and 33,643 were killed. Some 5,927 animals were returned to their owners or released in the wild.

The Westland shelter took in 2,028 puppies last year and killed 36 percent (369) of them. Adult dogs fared worse. Of 7,066 animals last year, 63 percent (3,800) were killed. Felines do worse than canines. Some 6,747 adult cats were admitted last year and 77 percent of them (4,443) were killed. Only 20 percent (1,326) were adopted.

The shelter took in 2,343 kittens last year and killed 64 percent (1,508). Only 28 percent (659) were adopted.

The Humane Society operates shelters in Westland, Rochester Hills and Detroit. The Westland and Detroit shelters are the busiest of the three. Each admitted about 20,000 animals in 1998, but Westland dropped more (4,231 to Detroit's 3,312) and killed less (12,352 to Detroit's 15,076). The Rochester shelter admitted 9,316, adopted 2,852 and killed 6,216.

- Animals killed
- ▒ Animals returned to owners
- △ Animals adopted

