

SUPPORT, INFORM, THEN ENFORCE

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR SAFE, HUMANE COMMUNITIES

We all agree that laws that govern responsible pet ownership are important to foster safe, humane communities, and there is wide agreement on what kind of laws do this (e.g., licensing and vaccination requirements, leash laws, confinement regulations, etc.).

The question then becomes which approaches work best to achieve widespread compliance with these laws?

WHAT WORKS FOR SAFE HUMANE COMMUNITIES?

First, it is important for municipal policy makers and enforcement agencies to make clear what is expected, and then to remove barriers that prevent well-intentioned pet owners from complying. The overwhelming majority of pet owners want to do the best for their pets and to be responsible members of their communities, but not all have the resources to accomplish this.

The progressive trend is to first forge relationships between animal services and pet owners, rather than penalizing first. Where relationships exist, problems can often be avoided, preventing much of the need for penalties.

MORE AND MORE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PROGRAMS ARE MODELING THE APPROACH OF HELPING PET OWNERS DO THE BEST FOR THEIR PETS AND THE COMMUNITY:

The Pets for Life program is one example of a humane organization applying the principle of “in-depth community understanding” and pet owner empowerment to provide accessible, affordable pet care in under-served communities. This approach integrates door-to-door outreach, and “builds a consistent community presence” in order to focus on relationship building with the community.

This community-outreach program helps with basic health needs like spay/neuter and vaccinations, and also provides supplies such as collars and leashes, which in turn can facilitate an owner’s compliance with local animal laws. A detailed description of the Humane Society of the United States Pets for Life efforts and results can be found online.¹

Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter is an example of a government approach, where they “aim to embody what we hope is a model for animal care and control in the 21st century.” The agency works to keep pets safe and well-cared for in their homes and prevent the need for surrenders. Again, the model is service and information before enforcement.

Animal control officers go door to door, introducing themselves and their services, even changing their uniforms to appear less like enforcers. They work with pet owners to help them understand the benefit to their community of compliance and to resolve any potential problems. When they uncovered an issue with low

compliance with vaccination laws, they organized a free shots fair. The agency also provides dog houses free of charge to owners of pets living with inadequate shelter.² The relationships built and resources shared by their outreach help to facilitate compliance with the area's laws and open the line of communication with animal services in a way that simply penalizing owners with minor violations cannot. Additional information on the program at Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter can be found online.³

PROGRESSIVE ACTIONS BY MUNICIPAL POLICY MAKERS AND ANIMAL CONTROL AGENCIES CAN ALSO AID IN ELEVATING RESPONSIBLE PET OWNERSHIP LAWS AND THEIR VALUE TO COMMUNITIES:

In the Town of Pierrepont, New York, the town has adopted the strategy of reminding residents that there are laws regarding pet ownership, and that they are taken seriously, by simply posting signs announcing: "dog control laws enforced." Such a simple action has a powerful effect of showing people that responsible pet ownership is valued in the community

"Free ride home" policies are often the cornerstone of forward thinking animal control programs, returning licensed or microchipped dogs directly to their families on their first offense. This prevents the dog from going through the shelter process and the community from dealing with the expense. These programs demonstrate the value of compliance with licensing / identification laws to pet owners.



CONCLUSION

While those who habitually or egregiously offend should certainly be penalized, exorbitant fines and euthanizing dogs whose owners cannot pay will never build relationships between animal services agencies and communities they serve. Community-based relationship building and removing barriers to compliance are the future of safe humane communities; focusing on punishment as a basis for relationships with community members is not.

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SOURCES and NOTES:

1. The Humane Society of the United States. (2014). Pets for Life: An In-Depth Community Understanding. Retrieved from: <http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/pets/pets-for-life/pfl-report-0214.pdf>
2. Aided through a grant from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA).
3. Stosuy, T. (2014). Putting a Friendly Face on Animal Control. Animal Sheltering Magazine. Retrieved from: <http://www.animalsheltering.org/resources/magazine/mar-apr-2014/putting-a-friendly-face-on.html>