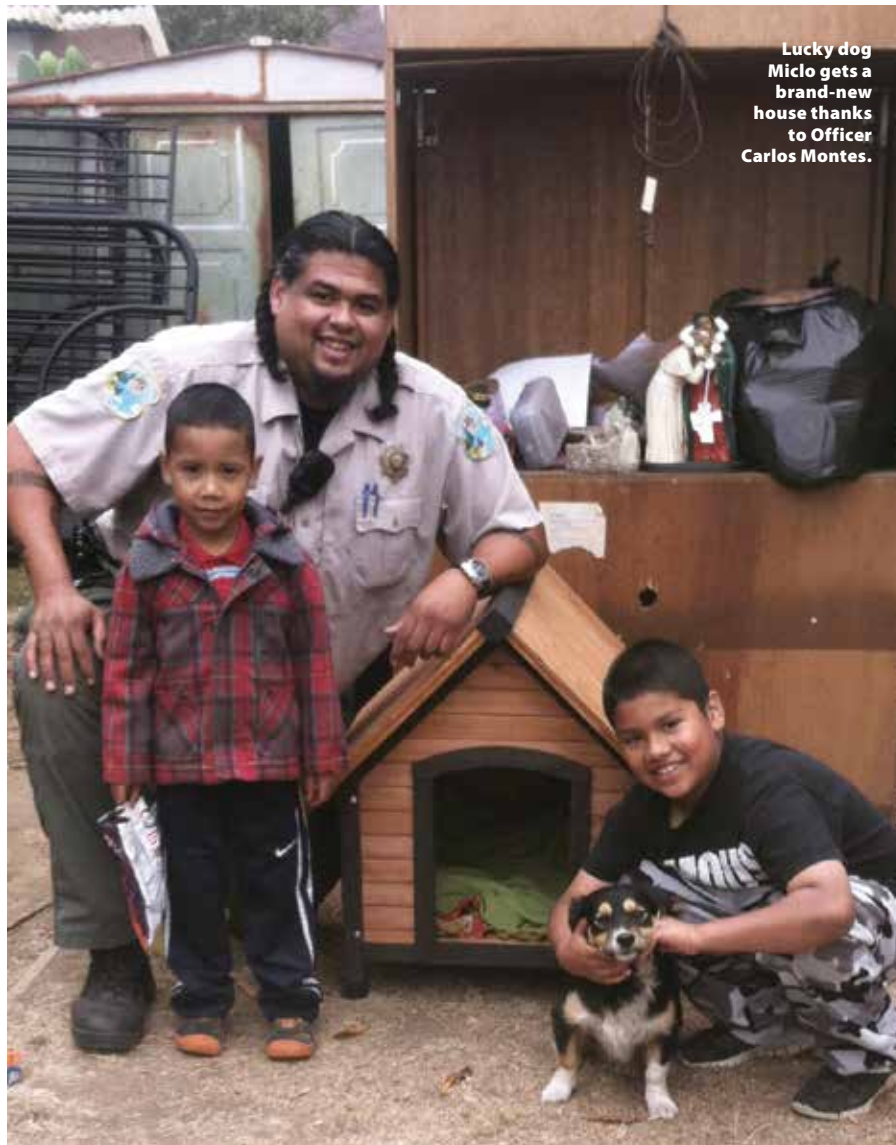


## Putting a Friendly Face on Animal Control

A door-to-door approach pays dividends in Santa Cruz.  
Could it work for your agency?

BY TODD STOSUY



Lucky dog Miclo gets a brand-new house thanks to Officer Carlos Montes.

Miclo and Spyke, Chihuahua/terrier mixes, were two such dogs. They lived with separate families in a small, run-down home in an underserved area of Santa Cruz County. The families provided the dogs with love and attention, but they couldn't afford to provide proper doghouses. They tried hard, making one house from scrap materials and providing a crate for the second dog, but the shelters did not give the animals proper protection from the elements. Additionally, in trying to do the right thing by keeping the dogs from "running loose," the owners had chained the dogs, a violation of California law and an unsuitable form of containment.

That's when we stepped in, providing free doghouses, pulley/trolley systems to substitute for chains and allow the dogs more range of motion, stainless steel water bowls, flea medication, and information on low-cost vaccination clinics. Officer Carlos Montes went to the house and, with the help of the family's children, built the two doghouses and installed the trolley systems. Miclo and Spyke now enjoy healthier, safer, and more comfortable lives.

Our agency is an open-admission, government-run animal care and control facility serving the county of Santa Cruz and the cities of Watsonville, Santa Cruz, and Scotts Valley. We have taken a progressive approach toward our role in the community, and aim to embody what we hope is a model for animal care and control in the 21st century. Our motto is "Open Door, Open Heart: Serving Santa Cruz County's Neediest Animals." We want the public to know that we will take in any animal, whether sick, injured, aggressive, or otherwise non-adoptable. Also, by better understanding and addressing the needs of our

Far too often, animal control officers find themselves dealing with owners who love their animals, but don't have the financial means to provide basic care that many take for granted, such as flea medication, proper shelter, or vaccines. Facing fines from well-intentioned ani-

mal control agencies, underprivileged owners are often forced to surrender their beloved pets.

At the Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter in California, we try and take a different approach—one aimed at helping struggling owners keep their pets for life.

## [scoop]

community, we hope to reduce the need for euthanasia.

We operate a number of community programs, such as outreach and adoption events, and promote our services through local media outlets and social media on a daily basis.

Our officers conduct preventative patrols and “boots on the ground” intervention through our Door to Door program, in which animal control officers visit neighborhoods with high numbers of service calls and animal impounds (statistics that correspond to increased euthanasia rates). This proactive approach is designed to help resolve issues before they arise.

We have found that in some areas, people have a negative opinion of law enforcement and won't open their doors to us—but they will open their doors to people who appear to be there to help. So when we go door to door, we don't wear our usual law enforcement uniforms. Instead, we wear less-intimidating outfits: a basic Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter T-shirt, duty belts with our protective equipment and radio (kept on for

our officers' safety), and badges concealed in our pockets. This approach has proven effective in outreach to traditionally underserved parts of our community.

During our visits, officers provide information on the importance of spay/neuter, free enrichment toys for backyard dogs, free doghouses, and free trolley systems for chained dogs. Most importantly, we answer questions and offer education on providing enriching and satisfying lives for their companion animals.

Officers try to resolve basic neglect issues with education, but if we happen upon an egregious cruelty/neglect issue, we handle it as a normal investigation. Mainly, though, our role is to be an accessible community resource.

We believe connecting with children and providing them with educational resources is important for the long-term success of positive animal ownership in the community. During our visits, we provide free “Junior Animal Control Officer” badge stickers, animal shelter temporary tattoos, and educational coloring books with animal and animal control officer themes.

As a result of this program, officers have started handling their daily calls with a more community-centered approach, working with owners to resolve problems. Each animal control vehicle has a compartment filled with flea medication, backyard dog enrichment toys, collars, leashes, and other items officers routinely provide free of charge to those in need. Additionally, through a generous grant from the ASPCA, we have more than 200 doghouses and 300 pulley systems to give to owners and animals.

Through our Planned Pethood program, we offer high-quality, low-cost spay/neuter services to any city or county resident for their dog, cat, or rabbit. The program is also a revenue generator because all animals who go through it receive a low-cost rabies vaccination (\$10 for dogs and cats), a low-cost microchip (\$25, including registration), and a license (\$29 for dogs) at the owner's expense. This way, every animal that leaves the shelter is in full compliance with the law.

Not only does this program provide a revenue stream at the front end, it prevents new animal births. Since more animals are microchipped and licensed, we can return animals found while we're in the field to the owners at that time, rather than bringing them back and clogging up the shelter system. We can lessen quarantine times for animals with current rabies vaccinations. All of this contributes to a decrease in the overall number of animals coming through the shelter.

Every year, we hold a Healthy Dogs Free Shots Fair in an area where we have noticed a lack of compliance with animal vaccination regulations. We provide free rabies, distemper, and parvo vaccinations, and give out dog food, leashes, and collars. We also talk to residents about the importance of enrichment activities for dogs, assist with low-cost spay/neuter services, and listen to and answer questions.

Through a partnership with YouthSERVE, a national nonprofit dedicated





Trained volunteers take glamour shots to draw attention to harder-to-place dogs like 8-year-old Grandpa (with ornaments) and Hattie, a stray who arrived with some medical issues.

to connecting youth with community service projects, we have been able to welcome nearly two dozen volunteers between ages 13-17 who do not have a parent or guardian in their household able to volunteer with them. Helping them make a positive difference in the lives of our animals—and often seeing the animals make a positive impact on them—is tremendously important to the development of empathetic and engaged citizens.

We also work with Shelter Art Foundation, a wide-reaching 501(c)(3) that teaches photography skills to animal shelter volunteers. The program provides hands-on workshops, manages an active Facebook site where volunteers from all over the county share images and ideas, and also lends photographic equipment to shelter teams until they can fundraise for their own. Ever since Shelter Art Foundation came to teach at Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter, public opinion about the shelter and our animals has improved dramatically. We have three

trained volunteer teams who come in several times a week to do adorable, posed portrait shots of our adoptable pets. We also make extensive use of the outtakes, when a photo catches the pet doing something silly. These are great conversation starters on Facebook and lighten the mood in shelter fliers. In our own ads, we've been able to transition from using stock photographs to showcasing our own shelter pets.

The programs highlighted in this article are just a few of the numerous proactive ways we are engaging our community, and part of what we believe is needed for animal control to be a true community-based program that helps both people and animals. ■

*Todd Stosuy is the field services manager of Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter, and has been the president of the National Animal Care & Control Association since 2010. For more information, contact Stosuy at asa235@co.santa-cruz.ca.us.*

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