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CARE & CONTROL ASSOCIATION

Animal Care and Control in the 21st Century

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As the animal care and control profession continues to grow and change, one thing is certain: we can no longer measure our success by the number of citations or notices to comply we issue or the number of animals we impound. Citations and notices to comply don't modify behavior and often create a mistrust of our agencies. This mistrust can cause people to not utilize our services - maybe they will go to a breeder instead of adopting, or they won't utilize our low cost spay/neuter or vaccine clinics. Impounding animals merely fills up our already overcrowded shelters and taxes shelter resources which can result in increased euthanasia.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't arrest and prosecute people who abuse or severely neglect animals, nor should we stop impounding sick, injured or unwanted animals. What we need to do is change our thoughts on what makes us successful in the long term as animal care and control professionals. I think everyone can agree that this equates to people properly caring for their animals, as well as keeping those animals in their homes for life. We can accomplish both of these goals without enforcement action by taking a more community based approach to how we serve our jurisdictions.

As officers we are on the front lines in our communities and have tremendous power to make cultural shifts in regards to how our communities care and treat their animals. If we work WITHIN our communities and create a trust of our agency, we can alter the perceptions of animal care for entire blocks, neighborhoods or even cities. These changes can take place while still maintaining respect and understanding of the culture within we are working. We should focus on the strengths of our community's culture, while at the same time try to transform the challenges into positives for the sake of the animals.

Word of mouth is a powerful tool in communities, especially underserved communities. If your agency is trusted and respected within the community, word will travel fast and people will come to you for advice on responsible animal ownership.

Issuing a citation or notice to comply is a quick and easy way for us to finish a call for service and move on to the next one. Unfortunately, while it makes our job easier for us on the front end, it often doesn't resolve the behavior we cited or issued the notice for, making us have to respond on another day to the same location for the exact same issue. Without providing opportunity for the person to understand what they did was wrong or illegal, we are merely putting a band aid on a broken arm. We as officers need to take time to speak with the public, discuss with them why what they did was a problem and try to help them modify their behavior. While this may mean staying on a call for an additional ten to fifteen minutes discussing the issue, it can resolve the issue right then and there and not require you to have to do follow-up.

Impounding animals from minor neglect situations also doesn't solve the root of the problem, which is the person's behavior. If we take the time to discuss issues with people, instead of immediately jumping to seizing an animal or issuing a notice to comply, we can affect that person's behavior and treatment of their current animal, as well as animals they get in the future. Remember, if you take this animal, they will likely just get another one and treat it the exact same way. And if you issue a notice to comply, they are only complying because you made them, not because they necessarily understand why they needed to make changes.

If we impound running at large dogs with identification and immediately bring them to the shelter, it also doesn't address the root of the problem of why the animal was loose in the first place. If we can bring the animal home, inspect the property and address the issue, we can help modify behavior on the front end. When people come to the shelter to reclaim their animals and only to speak with front office staff who have no knowledge of the dogs behavior or living situation, it can be difficult to give feedback. An officer who takes time to do a fence inspection and provide feedback on breed behavior, as well as specific issues with the particular dog can prevent future incidents of running at large.

We don't have to limit ourselves to only addressing legal issues, either. I can't count the number of times I have heard officers state, "if the animal has food, water and shelter there isn't much I can do." That may be true from an enforcement stance, but not an educational stance. Just because a backyard dog has food, water and shelter, it doesn't mean the dog isn't socially isolated and bored. We have a tremendous ability to effect change for these dogs by discussing enrichment ideas with the owners. Something as simple as providing a free Kong and peanut butter can help change the animal's life tenfold. I can't count the number of people within my community with backyard dogs who were absolutely amazed that the dogs stopped digging or barking just because of a simple Kong and explanation of socializing with their animal and providing enrichment opportunities.

The extra time on the front end my officers and I take to speak with the owners and work with our community has made the lives of the owners and the animals happier. This helps keep the animals in their homes for life and lessens the intake of animals on the already overburdened shelter system. It also has reduced our calls for service, giving us more time to work proactively in other parts of our community.