

THE CITY OF CALGARY ANIMAL SERVICES

A License to Succeed

Calgary's program brings in money and saves
lives by showing the value of those metal tags

BY JAMES HETTINGER





CALGARY ANIMAL & BYLAW SERVICES

BILL BRUCE SPEAKS SENSIBLY and doesn't have to carry a big stick: The licensing program he's created in his community in Alberta, Canada, has helped the "stick" side of the department's animal control work—enforcement—become secondary.

The work Bruce and his department have done in the city of Calgary can serve as a guide to any municipal agency that's struggled to get the public to understand and buy in to the concept of licensing. Where many cities struggle to get even dog owners to license their pets, in Calgary both dogs and cats must be licensed—and the revenue produced largely covers the cost of providing animal services for a city of 1.1 million people and 500 square miles. Bruce also reports high return-to-owner rates and low euthanasia numbers.

The money collected from licensing goes back into animals rather than into the city's general revenue fund, Bruce notes, so at budget time he doesn't have to compete against other departments. Licensing dollars fund the city shelter and its medical clinic, a free spay/neuter program for low-income people, and programs devoted to getting pets adopted, reuniting pets and owners, resolving animal-related disputes, and providing emergency medical care for injured pets.

Calgary Animal & Bylaw Services has an annual operating budget of about \$5.4 million, of which 80 to 85 per-



Animal health technician Lisa Madson holds a shelter kitty at the Calgary shelter. Cat licensing wasn't a popular idea when the city first broached it, but with proper education and marketing, it's become a hit.

cent comes from licensing. The remainder is generated by adoption fees, impound fees, and fines, but Bruce insists that heavy-handed enforcement is the last resort: “You only write a ticket if you’ve tried everything else first.”

Bruce cites that shift away from a ticket-writing mentality as crucial to the city’s success: His department has moved toward a “value-based” model of community engagement, where citizens feel compelled to be more responsible pet owners because they see the worth of the services they’re paying for.

A longtime city employee who previously worked in traffic engineering, Bruce says when he first visited local animal shelters, he noticed that many of the cats were friendly enough to be picked up and held. Likewise, many of the dogs in the kennels would obey commands to sit. Observing these realities, Bruce concluded that the primary issue in his town was clearly a human one. “Our problem is responsible pet ownership,” he says. “Every animal in a shelter or on the street is probably there because a human relationship failed. ... So then I thought, ‘We need to find more ways to support the relationships.’ ”

And when it came to pitching the public on the value of pet licenses, it was emphasizing those relationships that helped the department deliver the message.

Adding Value

Most jurisdictions have some form of animal licensing, Bruce says, but few do it well.

His advice for a jurisdiction thinking of starting or improving a licensing program is simple: Show people what the license will do for them—and for their pets.

Calgary didn’t start with the best approach, initially focusing on enforcement. Officers spent a lot of energy on license renewals, and the approach had limited success in increasing compliance.

People generally “don’t like to be told what to do, so when you see campaigns that say, ‘License your dog. It’s the law’—that is not gonna attract people,” Bruce says. But he contends that most people will comply with a law when they see a positive impact, such as more owners being reunited with their pets. “So we wanted to shift it and actually create a license system where you would want to license your pet because it brings value, not because it’s the law,” he explains. The department created an advertising campaign in which animals proclaimed, “My licence is my ticket home.”

Getting people to realize that a tag might save their animal’s life makes the concept of licensing much more positive. “The whole focus of responsible pet ownership is a campaign for something, rather than against,” says Patricia Cameron, executive director of the Calgary Humane Society, a nonprofit that partners with city animal services on a variety of programs. “After many decades and decades of working against animal abuse, neglect, and abandonment, we just know that doesn’t work, and we’re focusing



Calgary promotes licenses as the “ticket home” for lost animals. Officer Melissa Millette returns a dog to Karen Kelly after a stay in the shelter.

on a positive thing, which is the positive characteristics of pet ownership.”

Bruce credits his predecessor, Jerry Aschenbrenner, with being one of the first officials to see that licensing, in addition to turning the city’s animal services into a self-funded entity, could boost the return-to-owner rate. Dog licensing in Calgary began in earnest more than 20 years ago; cat licensing has trod a somewhat rockier path but is now widely accepted.

Calgary first considered requiring licenses for cats back in the 1990s. The effort predates his time as animal services director, but Bruce recalls that the idea sparked a passionate response. Hundreds of citizens objected and picketed city hall—citing everything from collar-choking concerns to an alleged centuries-old royal decree giving cats special status for their role in killing rats and stopping the plague. “Just what every council member wants,” Bruce jokes. “Hundreds of angry people that want to talk to *you*.”

That experience left a bad taste in people’s mouths, so Bruce tried a more collaborative approach when he resurrected the idea in the mid-2000s. He formed a committee that included the Calgary Humane Society, local rescue groups, veterinarians, breeders, and animal fanciers—people who shared the desire to get lost and stray animals home and reduce unnecessary euthanasias.

The group “really dissected the cat issue,” Bruce says, and discovered that in 2005 more than 9,000 cats were sheltered by city animal services and nonprofit groups, but only 17 percent had identification.

It was clearly a huge part of the problem. “The ones with ID generally go home,” Bruce explains. “The rest don’t do so well.” The committee went to the media, he says, “and explained that this is the situation in Calgary, and really asked





BILL BRUCE/CALGARY ANIMAL & BYLAW SERVICES

Calgary animal services officer Nikeae Michalchuk checks the license of a lost dog. Mandatory licensing for dogs and cats in the city has boosted return-to-owner rates and promoted responsible pet ownership.

... 'Calgarians, are you OK with that?' Because if the answer is, 'Yes, that's fine that that many cats get euthanized,' then I guess our work is done. But you know what? We knew it wasn't fine, and the people spoke out loud and clear."

Bruce says the committee spent two years consulting, educating the public, and mulling its options.

Its educational efforts involved distributing "Identification is your cat's ticket home" posters, pushing the message via newsletters and local talk shows, holding open houses, and conducting surveys. By the time the cat licensing proposal went before the city council, Bruce says, 85 percent of the public supported it. Animal services had aimed to license 20,000 cats in the program's first year; it wound up licensing 31,000.

Calgary now requires all dogs and cats to be licensed at age 3 months, and the fine for failing to comply is \$250. Dogs must wear their license tags when they're off their owners' property. Licensed cats must wear their tag or have a readable microchip or a legible tattoo.

About 90 percent of the dogs (more than 100,000) and more than half the cats (about 50,000) in Calgary have licenses, Bruce says, and the resulting revenue "virtually runs the place."

But the results of such a high-compliance program are greater than a financial boost for the animal services department.

In any community, Bruce notes, there's a strong correlation between licensing and return-to-owner rates. Dogs and cats in Calgary are issued stainless-steel tags that have an ID number and city phone numbers for finders to call. If an officer picks up a stray animal with a tag, he can find the owner by typing the tag number into a computer linked to the central office. If the animal isn't wearing a tag, the officer can type in a tattoo number or scan him for a microchip. "He'll get you on the phone and say, 'Good afternoon, Mr. Smith. I have Buster in my truck. He seems to have gotten out. Can I bring him home?' And nobody ever says no, so we drive him straight home," Bruce says. "About 30 percent of our dogs get driven straight home—they don't even come to a shelter."

The value of the licensing program is evident in the numbers it has produced.

In 2009, Calgary impounded 4,291 dogs, returning 86 percent to their owners, adopting out 9 percent, and euthanizing only 5 percent.

Cat licensing took effect Jan. 1, 2007, and quickly made an impact. The city's return-to-owner rate for impounded cats rose from 39 percent in 2006 to 56 percent in 2008. Meanwhile, the euthanasia rate dropped from 37 percent in 2006 to 18 percent in 2008. Those numbers stand in stark contrast to Canada as a whole, Bruce says, where the return-to-owner rate is about 2 percent and the euthanasia rate about 74 percent.

Bruce credits the licensing program's success to the collaborative spirit in Calgary—a sentiment echoed by some of the community's animal welfare advocates.

"We're all able to work together, and we complement the different strengths that each organization brings," says Kelly Hyde-Wein, board chair of the MEOW Foundation, a rescue group that operates a trap-neuter-return (TNR) program for feral cats.

Calgary does not require feral cats to be licensed—a requirement that would make the MEOW Foundation's TNR program logistically difficult, she explains. She notes that Bruce put a lot of thought into the city's animal bylaws, structuring them so that they work not just for the city but for the animals and local rescue groups. "We're able to do what we do with trap-neuter-return because of how Bill handles his licensing."

Making it Work

While getting public buy-in is crucial for a successful licensing program, you also have to sweat the small stuff.

Bruce advises jurisdictions to examine potential barriers: A mandatory spay/neuter law, for example, might cause people who can't afford the surgery to skip getting a license out of fear their intact pets will be detected. A limit on the number of pets someone is allowed to own also discourages licensing, Bruce says; if an owner has four pets but the law only allows three, he won't license them.

The folly of pet limits, he adds, is that an owner of four well-behaved Yorkies who weigh 35 pounds total is breaking the law, while down the street the owner of three enormous, vicious, out-of-control dogs is in compliance. Calgary focuses its animal services on the behavior side of the equation, Bruce says. "Your dog's not a problem, your cat's not a problem, until it causes someone a problem. So nothing's arbitrary—everything has that rationale to it."

The department also works to ensure that the licensing process stays affordable and convenient. Annual license fees are \$31 for neutered dogs, and \$52 if the animals are intact. For cats, the fees are \$10 for neutered, \$30 for intact.

A key to calculating fees, Bruce says, is to consider the "tipping point"—the point at which people will consider the cost too expensive and stop complying. He looks at the region's consumer price index and cost of living to determine a comfortable rate. "If it's too expensive, it becomes another barrier" to licensing and thus to responsible pet ownership, he explains. "... I try to stay a good \$5 back from the tipping point, so in times of recessionary roller coasters like we're on now, my licensing is going up every year, not dropping."

Bruce recalls visiting one jurisdiction that only issued animal licenses weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and not at lunchtime. The schedule prompted him to wonder how people with jobs would ever get licenses.

Calgary seeks to make it easier by offering people a variety of options. People can pay for a pet license in person



Bill Bruce, director of Calgary's animal services department, says he wants people to get their pets licensed because they see the value the program delivers—not simply because it's the law. Proudly wearing a license is Bruce's dog Amy, adopted from the Calgary shelter eight years ago.

at two locations, online, by telephone, by mail, through a night depository box at city hall, or even by flagging down a humane officer. Renewal notices are sent out automatically, and staff follows up with all owners who fail to renew. Impounded dogs and cats cannot leave the shelter without a license, and adopted animals get a six-month license for free.

Such details may seem small, but they can make a difference to the community an agency is trying to serve; they demonstrate that the animal services department understands the realities of people's lives.

It's all part of a collaborative spirit that, Cameron says, is greater in Calgary than any other community she's aware of. Many animal welfare groups elsewhere, she notes, engage in mutual finger-pointing and adopt the attitude that "We save animals better than you." But the cat licensing process in Calgary has brought groups together, making them more aware of each other's programs and particular skills, and the potential to help each other when shelters and foster homes are full. "I think more lives have been saved as a result of collaboration." 