

Stray cats overrun shelters

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They arrive in boxes and towels, eyes still shut, their soft, scared mewing the sound of tiny violins.

Most will be dead in hours at San Jose's Animal Care Center, hapless victims of a crisis beyond their control.

While a bill aimed at ending the crisis is wending its way through the state Legislature, communities that are diligent about spaying and neutering their pets are reporting dramatically lower kill rates at their shelters.

But in Santa Clara County, there are so many stray and homeless animals that 70 percent of the cats brought to San Jose's shelter have to be euthanized each year. The newborn and sick ones go first. About one in four of the more than 5,000 dogs brought in also have to be killed.

"You want to save them all, but it's absolutely impossible," said Barbara Glusker, North County foster home coordinator for the non-profit Town Cats rescue group. "It's so sad, because it's not their fault, it's the two-legged animals' fault."

That's the impetus for the proposed California Healthy Pet Act, which would require all California pet owners to have their cats and dogs spayed and neutered.

Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, the author of the bill, estimates that as many as 500,000 animals are euthanized at state shelters each year. The bill, which provides exemptions for professional breeders, faces heavy opposition from the American Kennel Club, the largest registry for dogs.

A program in Santa Cruz County, where the number of cats and kittens having to be euthanized dropped by nearly 50 percent in five years after a mandatory spay-neuter ordinance was passed in 1995, was a model for the bill.

In Marin County, there are so few stray and homeless animals that the Humane Society makes regular trips to the Central Valley to rescue animals facing death at shelters there so that there will be pets to adopt in Marin.

"Marin is in the enviable position of not generating an overpopulation of dogs, and even cats to a certain extent," said Sheri Cardo, director of public relations for the Marin Humane Society, which opened the first low-cost spay-neuter clinic on the West Coast in 1973.

"We have the community to thank for that. They got the message of spay-neuter early."

San Mateo County's Peninsula Humane Society is reaping the benefits of a \$125,000 gift from Vanessa Getty, a member of the prominent Getty family, to buy a mobile spay-neuter clinic, and enough fundraising by Getty and her friends to make the surgeries free. The vehicle is 26 feet long.

"We visited East Palo Alto for four consecutive weeks," said Scott Delucchi, spokesman for the shelter, located at Coyote Point. "It's our surgery suite on wheels. People call and say, 'Is this for real; is it really free?'"

The opening of two other shelters in Santa Clara County has given Humane Society Silicon Valley the opportunity to focus most of its efforts on getting animals adopted instead of dealing with the onslaught of unwanted and feral animals from all over the county, said Laura Fulda, spokeswoman for the shelter.

Fifteen years ago, the Santa Clara-based shelter was seeing up to 45,000 animals a year. Last year, the shelter took in 8,372 cats, dogs and rabbits. More than 1,800 of the cats were adopted, and 104 were returned to their homes, Fulda said.

The shelter also is able to take animals facing death row at the City of San Jose Animal Care Center and put them up for adoption.

"Nobody wants to euthanize animals," she said. "Shelters have to make tough choices."

By offering bargain-basement rates for spay-neuter at its 2-year-old shelter, San Jose already is seeing a slight drop in the

number of animals coming in and being euthanized. The city charges \$10 for female cats and \$5 for males.

In 2005, the shelter took in 17,924 animals. Just over 11,000 of those were cats, and about 8,000 of them had to be euthanized.

By comparison, "only 211 cats were reclaimed by their owners that year," said Jon Cicirelli, deputy director of the San Jose Animal Care and Services Department.

Last year, the shelter took in 10,706 cats and had to euthanize 7,413.

The shelter works closely with about 40 animal rescue groups in the county to try to save as many cats and dogs as possible, but everyone agrees the problem won't really diminish until more people spay and neuter their pets.

"If everybody would do a little bit, trap one or two cats so they can be spayed and neutered, that would make a tremendous difference," he said. "If everybody was considerate with their dog and cat, there wouldn't be a need for my business."

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