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Unwanted Dogs Stress City Pound

BY GEOFFREY A. FOWLER

Earlier this month, San Francisco's pound made an unusual public plea: No more dogs, please.

The city's Animal Care and Control Department was facing a population problem—it has about 100 kennel spaces, but was taking in some 300 dogs a month from people who abandoned or turned in their pets. "We were completely crunched for space," says Rebecca Katz, the director of ACC, who put out a request that residents wait a week to surrender their dogs to alleviate the immediate overflow.

Overcrowding at the public pound is afflicting cities across the U.S. amid a weak economy. But in San Francisco, a contingent of animal activists is developing solutions they hope might relieve the pressure. Among them: financial aid for pet owners who can't handle vet bills; collaboration with private businesses; and specialized placement programs for hard-to-adopt dogs. Some of the programs are among the first solutions of their type in the U.S. to help keep challenging dogs with families—and away from euthanasia.

By some measures, San Francisco remains one of the best places in the country for pets. The city has one of the lowest stray and surrendered animal intake rates in the country, at 8.8 animals per 1,000 people, according to the San Francisco SPCA. In Yolo County, the rate is three times higher; in Merced, the rate is 9.2 times higher, according to

the SPCA.

But in recent years, the numbers of dogs taken in by San Francisco's ACC has grown by leaps, from 1,939 in the 2007-08 fiscal year to 2,424 in the 2010-11.

Behind the problem, officials say, is a tough economy that has made pet care more expensive. At the same time, killing unwanted dogs to alleviate overcrowding, common in many places, isn't on the table as a solution, say city officials and local animal activists. Since 1994, the ACC has had an agreement with the local chapter of the SPCA to take all adoptable pets in its facilities that the city wants to surrender instead of euthanizing them.

The ACC does euthanize non-adoptable animals, though publicity surrounding the latest space crunch helped the pound give away animals at a weekend adoption event. The ACC also takes in cats, though their numbers have declined in the past few years.

Now the pound and other non-profit shelters are filling with older dogs, and ones with health and behavior problems. "What you see is a shift from healthy and adoptable to more difficult to adopt out dogs," says Jennifer Scarlett, co-president of the SPCA.

One potential solution to help relieve the overcrowding is to provide medical financial aid for people who might otherwise be forced to surrender their pets, say officials. The SPCA's nonprofit hospital offered almost \$2 million in charitable care last year, but says the need is still greater than it can provide.

A group called San Francisco



Aid for Animals also began raising a fund last spring that the 100 members of the city's Veterinary Medicine Association can tap to help needy owners. Given the high cost of San Francisco real estate for vet clinics, a simple procedure like a teeth cleaning for a dog can cost \$600.

The fund, which would be one of the first of its kind in the U.S., has so far raised about \$20,000 but wants \$60,000 by next summer, says Alan Stewart, the San Francisco vet who is leading the group.

"Our goal is try to keep the animal with the owner and not let them end up in a shelter," he says.

Another solution is finding more homes for the dogs and better ways to market the "problem" ones filling up the pound. ACC is exploring partnerships with private kennels that could handle overflow dogs, or provide behavioral training.

San Francisco also has a growing network of nonprofit adoption groups such as one called Mutt-

ville, which takes on elder dogs that other facilities would have more difficulty adopting out. Muttville's founder, Sherri Franklin, began her program in 2007 to give older dogs needed medical care, then pitch them to families in need of dogs with known or calmer personalities.

Muttville has attracted would-be dog owners such as Becky DeMarco, a 36-year-old mother of a 3-year-old in San Francisco who was recently looking to replace a family pet put down because of health problems.

At the end of July, she adopted Figgy, a 12-year-old border collie. With an older dog, Ms. DeMarco says she doesn't have to worry about training the dog to stop jumping up on guests or digging up the back yard. And while Figgy, like many other elder dogs, is deaf, she says that's worth the trouble.

"She has no emotional issues or problems," says Ms. deMarco. "She takes naps with my 3-year-old."