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For most pets, local shelters a dead end

Critical report finds euthanasia lower elsewhere, suggests ways to spare animals

By **BILL MURPHY**
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Local animal shelters kill a higher percentage of animals than shelters in many other cities, but could lower the toll by working together and mimicking some of the successful policies practiced elsewhere, a city task force has concluded.

The task force is especially critical of the the city shelter, the Bureau of Animal Regulation and Care, singling it out for policies that call for automatic euthanasia of breeds deemed aggressive.

Those include pit bulls, German shepherds, Akitas, bulldogs, chow chows, Rottweilers and Doberman pinschers. Most shelters nationwide euthanize pit bulls, but not all of the other breeds.

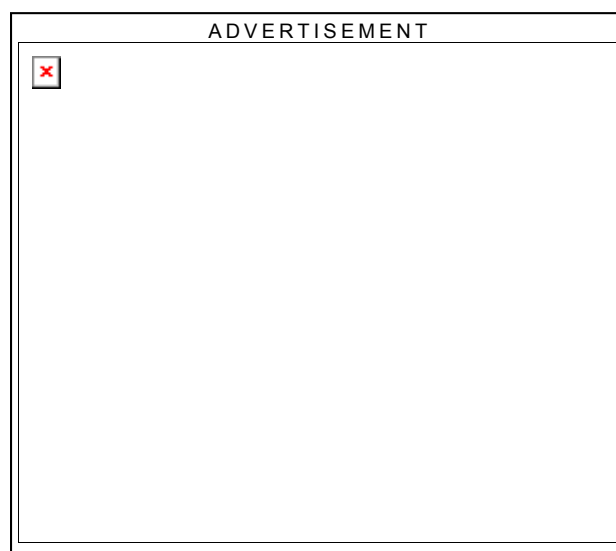
The Chronicle obtained a draft of the task force's final report, due to be released today.

It says pet euthanasia can be reduced over the next five years if the city, county and three nonprofit shelters join forces to increase adoption and offer cheaper, better spay-neuter services .

"It is essential to shatter the widespread illusion that turning a pet into a Houston shelter means putting him up for adoption, when the truth is that the pet will most likely be killed," the report says.

Mayor Bill White appointed the task force nearly a year ago after the Chronicle reported on high euthanasia rates at area shelters. The task force, chaired by lawyer Alison Smith, recommended an overhaul of BARC's rules and procedures and said the city should hold a capital campaign to raise money to build a new facility at a more accessible site. The existing BARC shelter is in an industrial area north of downtown.

More than 80,000 animals that entered the area's five primary shelters in 2004 were killed — 70 percent of the overall admissions. Cities with progressive policies to reduce euthanasia have achieved much lower percentages, the report says.



"Houston has too many abandoned pets and an animal welfare community whose principal solution to the problem is euthanasia," the task force said.

Officials at local shelters told the task force that they are overwhelmed by the volume of animals they receive.

"In their view, area shelters face a tidal wave of abandoned pets and, in light of too little shelter space and dollars, simply have no choice other than euthanizing most pets they receive," the report says. "We do not agree with that thinking."

Other cities reduced animal euthanasia after taking steps to increase adoption, spaying and neutering, the report says.

The nonprofit San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals joined forces with the city shelter. It took a 15-year effort, but only a small percentage of the animals at the shelters are now euthanized, mostly because they are ill or dangerously aggressive.

Travis County's public animal shelter reduced its euthanasia rate to about half of admitted pets by increasing adoptions, the report says.

"If San Francisco can eliminate pet euthanasia as a principal solution to the problem of abandoned pets, there is no reason why Houston cannot," the report says. "The choice to euthanize is a relic of an outmoded belief that pets are disposable property and that shelters exist to kill unwanted pets 'humanely,' not help them."

Harris County Rabies and Animal Control euthanized 77 percent of more than 26,000 admitted pets in 2004, the report says. BARC killed about 80 percent of 23,000 that year.

At the area's three main, private, nonprofit shelters, Citizens for Animal Protection euthanized 46 percent of its admitted pets, Houston Society for the Prevention to Cruelty to Animals 59 percent, and Houston Humane Society 86 percent, the report says.

Like other shelters nationwide, BARC says it has a high euthanasia rate because it kills pets that are not adoptable. But BARC's definition of non-adoptability is broad and it has "a strong bias in favor of euthanasia," the report says.

An official from a shelter elsewhere "expressed shock at BARC's automatic practice of euthanizing German shepherds, which were 'some of the best candidates for adoption,' " the report says.

BARC often has few pets available for adoption because it does not devote enough veterinary help to spaying and neutering adoptable animals, performing surgeries only two days a week, the task force found.

"Harris County performs spays and neuters on a daily basis. ... The task force heard sentiment in the animal welfare community that the city of Houston would be wise to contract out BARC's operation to Harris County," the report says.

Only about 1 percent of impounded animals in Fort Bend County are adopted, said Debbi Horrocks, assistant director of the county Animal Control Department.

In Sugar Land, the animal control division picks up about 480 pets annually, said Kathi Sutton, a supervisor for Sugar Land Animal Control Division. One-fourth are adopted, and another fourth are given to animal rescue groups. Sugar Land contracts with the Houston Humane Society to euthanize the remainder, Sutton said.

Last year Montgomery County Animal Control sheltered about 14,000 animals and euthanized about 11,000, said Deputy Director Kelli Copeland. The agency started a low-cost spay-neuter program in June to try to reduce the dog and cat population.

Chronicle reporters Eric Hanson and Renée C. Lee contributed to this story.

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