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The Charlotte Observer

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CAROLINAS

Toddlers could be tested for mercury

States seek grants to address threat posed by toxic metal found in fish

By Bruce Henderson
Staff Writer

ON THE WACCAMAW RIVER — After more than a decade of measuring mercury in fish, water and air, Carolinas officials will seek grants this week to test a final frontier: people.

Thousands of people on the coastal plain, where mercury most commonly takes a toxic form, would be tested if the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention approves the grants. Many in Piedmont counties east of Charlotte would be tested, too.

Even without a CDC grant, South Carolina hopes to forge ahead with plans to test 12,000 toddlers, who are at special risk.

In North Carolina, a state toxicologist estimates 7,400 children born each year are already at risk from mercury. In its most toxic form, it can cause neurological damage to developing fetuses and harm the way children think, learn and problem-solve.

A naturally occurring metal, mercury also blows out of industrial smokestacks, mostly coal-fired power plants and incinerators.

SEE **POISON** | 6A

HAD BEEN MISSING

Soldiers are found dead near Baghdad

Elusive Iraqi resistance poses constant threat to U.S. troops on patrol

By Mike Dorning
Chicago Tribune

BAGHDAD, Iraq — The American soldiers who patrol Iraq's darkened streets know they are being stalked.

In Fallujah, opponents of the U.S.-led occupation fire flares to mark the movements of military police. In Baghdad, bursts of gunfire – one if by Humvee, two if by foot – signal the arrival of American troops.

Someone hidden on a roof might open fire or throw a grenade. But sometimes, the enemy is only scouting.

The danger was brought home again Saturday, when U.S. officials said two American soldiers missing since Wednesday and feared abducted were found dead in a town 20 miles northwest of Bagh-

SEE **IRAQ** | 17A

DEATH AT THE POUND

TODD SUMLIN – STAFF PHOTOS

A veterinarian technician comforts a dying kitten, waiting as a lethal dose of poison takes effect. The procedure is repeated dozens of times a day at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg animal shelter. The golden-brown dog shown above spent six days at the shelter awaiting his fate. See his story on Page 10A.

Animals in the Charlotte region are killed at more than twice the national average, and little is being done to stem the problem

By Michelle Crouch and Scott Dodd | Staff Writers

FIRST IN A SERIES

Dogs and cats are being killed in shelters throughout the Carolinas at rates that far surpass the average across the country.

Every year, more than 80,000 animals, many of them healthy and adoptable, are put down in Mecklenburg and surrounding counties. The regional rate of 37 animals euthanized per 1,000 people is more than double the national average of 16.

The doomed dogs and cats often spend their last days in crowded, stench-filled shelters that haven't adopted the best practices experts recommend. Most die in gas chambers, a method animal advocates consider outdated and potentially inhumane.

Not one county in the region has spent public money on the only method proven to reduce the number of unwanted animals killed in shelters: spaying and neutering pets to cut down on population growth.

Charlotte's shelter, the region's largest and best-funded, kills about 70 percent of the animals that enter its doors, all by lethal injection. And the numbers are going up, even as they drop around the country.

The percentage of animals killed in surrounding counties, usually by carbon monoxide, is even higher.

SEE **DEATH** | 11A

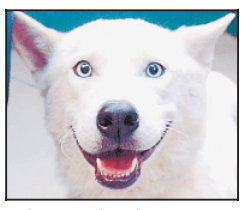
Inside

A summary of this investigation and what's coming Monday and Tuesday. **11A**

How several communities across the country have lowered the number of animals killed in shelters. **13A**

Best practices recommended by the Humane Society of the United States and how area communities stack up. **12A**

Want to help? See a list of Charlotte-Mecklenburg animal welfare groups inside or check www.charlotte.com. Lists of similar groups can be found in today's regional sections serving Alexander, Burke, Cabarrus, Caldwell, Catawba, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lancaster, S.C., Lincoln, Rowan, Union and York, S.C., counties. **12A**



Siberian husky
Killed

Collie mix
Killed

Tabby kittens
Killed

Lab/chow mix
Killed

Labrador retriever
Returned to owner

Siamese-mix kitten
Adopted

On the same day last month, these dogs and cats entered the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Animal Control shelter, where seven out of 10 animals are put to death. Learn more about them on Monday.

Weather

PARTLY SUNNY: High: 86. Low: 67. Warm today. Mild with a shower possible tonight. **Full forecast, 8B**

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KNIGHT RIDDER — INFORMATION FOR LIFE

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DEATH AT THE POUND

Thousands of animals are put down every year in the Charlotte region. This is one dog's story.

Caught, caged, killed

DAY 1

Two stray dogs were roaming west Charlotte on May 30 when Charlotte-Mecklenburg Animal Control officer John Broadie responded to a complaint call. One dog (shown closest to Broadie) ran away when the officer knelt to call it. Instead, Broadie snagged the male mixed-breed chow on the right with a catch pole. He took it to the city-run shelter at the end of his shift. The dog shook and cowered as kennel workers checked him over.

DAY 4 **The golden-brown dog is kept alone in a pen at the shelter because of his anxious behavior, as he waits several days for his owner to claim him. No one ever came for him.**

DAY 6

After five nights at the shelter, the dog's time is up. Shelter worker Kim Miller holds him as vet tech Sonya Bilyeu checks for a vein, where she will inject the poison. "Say hello to your friends," Miller says gently as the poison takes effect, killing the dog in seconds. "Get you some steak," Bilyeu says.

After the dog's body is placed in a wheelbarrow to be taken to the incinerator, Miller wipes down the metal table before the next animal is brought in.

By Todd Sumlin | Staff Photos

DEATH AT THE POUND

First of three parts

No home, no hope at the pound

Death *from 1A*

Caldwell killed 91 percent of dogs and cats at its shelter in 2002. Gaston killed 90 percent and Iredell 89 percent.

Rural Anson County, east of Union, kills almost every animal at its shelter. It has one animal control worker who has to shut down the facility every time he goes on a call.

In county after county, the explanation is the same: Officials say they don't have the money and can't make animals a priority at a time when growth is increasing the need for human services such as police and schools.

"There's only so much public money to go around," said Reggie Horton, Gaston's animal control administrator. "And by the time you get down to animal issues, the coffer's dry."

Experts say solving the problem isn't just a matter of more spending. What needs to change, they say, are attitudes and priorities – adopting methods proven to save animals rather than spending money to kill them. Other cities and states have saved both money and animal lives by investing in high-volume, low-cost spay-neuter programs, particularly those that target pets in low-income communities.

The South in general and rural communities in particular tend to lag behind urban areas and other parts of the country, in part because of an agricultural background that views animals as commodities, not companions.

"The attitude is: 'We kill animals. So what?' " said Bob Christiansen, an Atlanta author and animal population consultant.

The Observer found:

■ All but two counties in the 15-county Charlotte region use carbon monoxide to kill animals, even though it's discouraged by national animal welfare groups. Though experts say carbon monoxide is painless if used correctly, the Carolinas require no training for the shelter workers who administer the gas, and some animals have to be gassed twice because it doesn't always kill the first time.

■ More than half the counties spend less than $4 per person on animal control, which is the minimum recommended by the International City/County Management Association to finance an adequate program. The lack of spending – as low as $1.42 per person in Anson and $2.80 in Catawba – makes it difficult for shelters to provide adequate care.

■ Shelters are frequently overcrowded, and some are rundown and disease-ridden. The Union shelter is so rodent-infested, its supervisor called it "a giant mouse heaven." Even the best shelters aren't large enough to handle all the animals that come in daily.

■ Many counties in the region don't follow the best practices recommended by national groups, including sterilizing all animals before they're adopted and vaccinating animals in shelters to prevent disease outbreaks. The majority of Charlotte-area counties don't require owners to license their pets, a basic step used by many communities nationally to track the animal population and raise money for preventative programs.

Conditions in the Charlotte region are reflected across the Carolinas. Statewide, between 35 and 40 animals per 1,000 people are killed in North Carolina, compared with the national average of 16, according to a publication that tracks such figures. South Carolina does not compile statewide numbers.

Neither state regulates county-operated shelters, although private N.C. facilities must be registered and inspected. And state officials say they know of no Carolinas county that requires owners without a breeding permit to neuter their pets, as some communities elsewhere do to keep down population growth.

"The counties don't want state government involved," said Dr. Charles Kirkland, the director of animal health programs in the N.C. state veterinarian's office. "At the same time, there need to be some sort of standards."

The N.C. General Assembly created a commission last fall, Kirkland said, to examine the state's animal welfare laws and suggest changes.

So far, it hasn't met.

TODD SUMLIN – STAFF PHOTO

Fluffy came to the Charlotte animal shelter abused and neglected. His chain had cut into his neck; he was 40 pounds underweight and covered with mats of hair. The shelter workers decided to save him, nursing him back to health and hoping someone would take him home. It's a way to improve morale and deal with the strain of their jobs.

County-by-County Kill Rates

The following chart shows the number and percentage of animals killed at shelters in the Charlotte region in 2002, as well as the number of animals killed per 1,000 people in each county. U.S. animal shelters collectively kill about 16 animals per 1,000 people.

County	No. killed	% killed	Killed per 1,000
Lancaster, S.C.*	5,085	91%	82
Caldwell	5,729	91%	74
Alexander	2,385	88%	70
Cleveland	6,608	91%	68
Stanly	3,491	74%	59
Anson	1,358	100%	54
Iredell	6,704	89%	51
Burke	4,415	83%	49
York, S.C.*	7,102	79%	41
Gaston	7,591	90%	40
Catawba	5,482	81%	37
Union	5,196	72%	37
Lincoln	2,115	78%	32
Cabarrus	3,933	80%	28
Mecklenburg	14,095	70%	19
TOTALS	**81,289**	**81%**	**37**

SOURCE: Animal control officials in each county.
* These figures are for the 2001-02 fiscal year.

Money for Animal Control

The following chart shows the amount spent per person on animal control in fiscal year 2002-03 for each county in the Charlotte region. A national group that studies the best practices for city and county governments, the International City/County Management Association, says an effective animal control program costs at least $4 per person.

County	$/person
Mecklenburg	$5.58
Lincoln	$4.67
Iredell	$4.42
Gaston	$4.13
Union	$4.06
Cabarrus	$3.95
Burke	$3.84
Alexander	$3.83
Caldwell	$3.83
Cleveland	$3.16
Stanly	$3.05
Lancaster, S.C.	$3.02
York, S.C.	$2.81
Catawba	$2.80
Anson	$1.42

SOURCE: Animal control officials

'Horrible way to die'

The majority of counties in the Carolinas use gas to kill most animals – a method banned by at least two states, Maryland and California.

In the Charlotte region, only Mecklenburg and Burke counties always use lethal injection. When Sheriff John McDevitt took over Burke's animal control in 2001, he was so opposed to the gas chamber that he had it knocked down with a sledge hammer.

"It's a horrible way to die," he said. "You gas them, then you listen to them howl and bark."

Officials in other counties say they want to be humane. They put down young and sick animals by lethal injection. But they say they can't afford to use that method every time. It's more expensive, requiring more time and at least two people. One must be a trained technician to handle the drugs.

Some animal welfare groups object to gas because it takes longer to work – several minutes, as opposed to the usual five to 20 seconds for injection – and is more subject to misuse.

"If it's done correctly, according to the proper guidelines, it is painless," said Kirkland, with the N.C. state vet's office. "They just lie down and go to sleep."

But the Carolinas don't require animal control workers to undergo training before administering the gas, even though some counties do it anyway.

National groups offer standards for using gas, but not all counties follow them. Often, animals are loaded into cages or a chamber together, where they can fight and hurt one another as they die. Recommendations say to keep animals separate and avoid crowding.

"You put a bunch of strange dogs or puppies together," Kirkland said, "they're going to be scrambling all over each other."

Cabarrus puts several animals in a cage together – separated by species – and rolls them into the gas chamber. In Union, as many as 10 dogs are gassed together in a 4-by-4-foot steel container. It replaced a cinder-block chamber that leaked, causing some animals to survive the gassing.

Stanly County still has that problem. "After you bring them out, some of them aren't all down," said animal control officer Randy Palmer, who has had the job for 25 years. "Sometimes we have to put them back in."

With lethal injection, animals are held by technicians who can comfort them as they die and feel their heartbeats fade.

"The one kindness you can give an animal that's had a rough life is that final little scratch behind the ear and a very quick death," said Martha Armstrong of the Humane Society of the United States. "You can't do that in a carbon monoxide chamber."

Union shelter worker Chuck Davis said it's tough to wake up knowing he'll have to kill six or seven puppies that day. He and other workers console each other by saying the dogs are going to a better place.

"I'm going to hell," he said, "cause they're going to heaven."

Aging and overcrowded

Many shelters are old and rundown, and even new ones aren't large enough to handle all the lost and stray animals, or pets surrendered by owners who don't want them anymore.

In Union, flies land on bags of donated dog food, which the shelter depends on because it gets only $300 to $400 from the county budget each year to feed up to 8,000 animals.

The shelter has one room with air conditioning. Cats are housed there.

"It's kind of ironic to me that the Health Department runs the shelter, but it certainly wouldn't pass any health inspection," said Union humane society president Cindy Poppino.

Gaston has so many animals right now, during the breeding season, that some kittens are being housed temporarily in cages outside the main building.

Several counties, including Lincoln, Caldwell, Cabarrus and Alexander, recently built new shelters. Charlotte-Mecklenburg opened a new facility in 1993.

Even those can't keep up with the growing animal population. They often house more than they were built to hold.

Overcrowded conditions allow disease to spread easily, and only a few counties vaccinate every animal that comes in to prevent full-scale outbreaks.

Teri McAllister, president of Recycled Pets Inc. in York County, S.C., said many animals the group rescues from the shelter are sick. The county often puts as many as eight dogs in 8-by-8-foot pens at its 25-year-old pound, which is scheduled to be replaced next summer.

Kristin Baidel of York adopted an orange-striped kitten there last month. Her daughters named it Tigger.

Eight days later, Tigger died of panleukopenia, a highly contagious disease that spreads when animals are crammed together.

"My little girls wanted to know where their cat went," Baidel said. "I would never go back there."

Underfunded, overwhelmed

Animal shelters, like everything else in tough budget times, face cutbacks and shortages.

A decade ago, Gaston had 25 animal control employees. Now that's down to 23, and two positions remain open, even as the county's population grows and it copes with a rabies epidemic.

It was so bad last summer, when a flood of emergency calls came in, that the department often had to put off dealing with strays, sometimes for as long as three months, said Horton, the animal control administrator.

"Euthanasia numbers are down because total impoundment numbers are down," he said. "We just don't have the people out there doing the job."

Union's animal control didn't receive any new staff positions between 2000 and 2002, supervisor Susan Marsh said – even though officers responded to 2,394 more calls in 2002, a 23 percent increase.

That means tasks that could save more animals have been pushed to the side. For example, the shelter hasn't updated pictures on its adoption Web site for six months. The Union humane society, which tries to fill the gaps, paid for catch poles that the city of Monroe's animal control officers use to snag strays.

Often, it takes a crisis for political leaders to pay attention. In Lincoln County four years ago, deputies shot 33 dogs they were rounding up at the home of a man who'd gone to the hospital.

It generated outrage, but also change.

The sheriff's office revamped its animal control bureau, providing new training and procedures. It finally moved out of a small concrete facility built in the 1940s – which had only a frayed tarp blocking the euthanasia area from view.

In Burke, Sheriff McDevitt said he begged for years for money to increase his staff. But it wasn't until a dog bit a little girl that officials agreed to double his officers to four.

Attitudes hinder change

While a lack of resources plays a big part in why so many animals die in the Carolinas, the problem is far larger.

Rural residents tend to have different views and values when it comes to dogs and cats, animal control officers and humane society leaders say.

"People think every female dog should have her puppies, and every male dog should keep his testicles," said Susan Summerall, a leader with the S.C. Animal Care and Control Association. "That's the unfortunate way of life in the South."

She said it's no surprise that

SEE **DEATH** | 12A

About This Series

TODAY

More than 80,000 unwanted dogs and cats were killed last year in animal shelters across the Charlotte region. That's more than double the national average of animals killed per 1,000 people.

Most die in gas chambers, a method animal welfare groups consider outdated and that at least two states prohibit. Neither North Carolina nor South Carolina requires training for shelter workers who administer the gas, or regulates and inspects county-owned facilities, which are often crowded and underfunded.

Local governments plead that their budgets can barely meet all the needs of their fast-growing human populations, much less do better by animals. Mecklenburg and surrounding counties now spend no public money on spaying and neutering programs that could help reduce the animal population and have proved cost-effective in other places.

COMING MONDAY

Charlotte is killing more animals at its shelter even as other cities around the country cut their death rates.

COMING TUESDAY

The Humane Society of Charlotte, the area's largest animal welfare group, faces questions about how it uses its resources.

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E-mail: Readers@charlotteobserver.com. Please write "animals" in the subject field.
Write: The Charlotte Observer
P.O. Box 30308
Charlotte, NC 28230-0308
Attention: Animal project editor
Call: (704) 377-4444. After the greeting, enter category 1008. You will have 30 seconds to leave a message, including your name, phone number and county. If you would like to be contacted by e-mail, please include your e-mail address.

DEATH AT THE POUND

First of three parts

Animals flood area shelters

Death *from 11A*

the Carolinas kill more animals than elsewhere. Many rural S.C. counties didn't even create animal control bureaus until the 1970s, she said. In other parts of the country, bureaus have been around for more than a century, and have had time to change attitudes and adopt better practices.

Rural counties face resistance to methods commonly used in other places to help control the animal population and reduce breeding, such as leash and licensing laws and spaying and neutering programs.

"They're operating with the kind of dog regulation that existed right after the Civil War," said Merritt Clifton, a national pet population expert. "It's a matter of deciding that they want to come into the 21st century."

Iredell officials actually did away with the county's licensing program about eight years ago because the county didn't have the staff to enforce it. Residents who paid for the licenses lobbied to have the law repealed because so few people were following it.

The fee was $5.

Spay-neuter efforts stalled

Charlotte-area officials don't devote public money to spaying and neutering, which has cut kill rates dramatically elsewhere in the country. Other cities and states provide vouchers to poor residents, pay for sterilization clinics and engage in large-scale public education campaigns.

In the Charlotte region, humane societies, concerned veterinarians and other groups provide some low-cost options. But counties have left the job up to those private groups, or they charge people who want to adopt pets for the cost of sterilizing them.

Most counties require animals adopted from their shelters to be neutered, but many don't perform the operation themselves. They require new pet owners to sign contracts pledging to do the job at a private vet, but officials often don't have the legal authority or manpower to follow up.

Statewide spay-neuter efforts have had little impact, as well. In 2001, N.C. lawmakers created a fund to reimburse counties that provide those services to low-income residents.

But resistance from the N.C. Veterinary Medical Association weakened the proposed law, legislators say. Instead of paying for those programs by collecting an extra 50 cents from everyone who bought a rabies tag, the state created a separate tag that pet owners had to choose to buy. And animal advocates say vets, who sell the tags, don't promote them.

The program, which also gets money from special vehicle license plates, raised about $40,000 last year. Only four counties have applied for a share of the money – none from the Charlotte region – because it isn't enough to make a difference, officials say.

"Vets have hobbled this program from the very beginning," said N.C. Sen. Ellie Kinnaird, D-Orange, who sponsored the legislation. "It's not working the way we intended it to. It's been very disappointing."

Kinnaird has introduced a new bill that would revive the original plan, but vets are already lining up against it. They say the extra 50 cents could discourage people from getting rabies vaccinations, which are required by law.

"As much as we can solve this problem privately, we should do that," said Dr. Sarah Brown, a leader of the vet association. "Government intervention can't solve everything."

Shelter workers who deal with the results of animal overpopulation have their share of horror stories. They're about people, not pets.

Like the Catawba County family that drops off a litter of pit bull puppies at least three times a year to be killed – but won't agree to have the dogs neutered.

Or the Union County woman who brought in puppies to be killed, then tried to adopt a cat.

"Sometimes you would like to put to sleep some of the people that bring animals in," said Davis, a shelter worker.

"They are idiots."

— STAFF WRITERS KYTJA WEIR, JAIME LEVY, HANNAH MITCHELL AND KATHRYN WELLIN CONTRIBUTED TO THIS REPORT.

Best Practices in Animal Control

The following chart shows how each county in the Charlotte region fares on some of the practices recommended by the Humane Society of the United States and the International City/County Management Association, which jointly produced a guidebook on effective animal control programs.

● YES ○ NO ◑ SOME

BEST PRACTICES	Charlotte-Mecklenburg	Alexander	Anson	Burke	Cabarrus	Caldwell	Catawba	Cleveland	Iredell	Gaston	Lancaster, S.C.	Lincoln	Stanly	Union	York, S.C.
All animals killed by lethal injection, not gas	●	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Animals spayed and neutered before being released for adoption from county shelter	●	●	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	●	○	●	●	○	◑**
Animals vaccinated as soon as they enter the shelter to prevent the spread of disease	●	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	◑**
Mandatory licensing or registration program	●	○	○	◑*	○	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	●	○	○
Higher license fees for fertile animals	●	○	○	◑*	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Low-cost spay and neuter services available	●	●	○	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	●
Government-subsidized spay and neuter program	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Spay and neuter efforts target low-income pet owners	◑	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	●	●	○	○	○	○	○
Volunteers walk and socialize animals to increase their chances of adoption	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	○	●	○	●	●	○	●	●
Shelter receives animals without charging a surrender fee	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Shelter is open Saturday and Sunday	●	○	○	◑	●	○	○	○	◑	◑	◑	●	◑	◑	◑
Photos of adoptable animals are posted on a national Web site such as petfinder.org	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	●
Animals get microchips or tattoos for identification before adoption	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Agency pursues grants and private donations	●	○	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	●	●	○	○

* Dogs only **Shelter has part-time vet

OBSERVER STAFF REPORTS

How to Help Animals Needing a Home

There are many ways to help reduce the number of dogs and cats being killed every day in the Charlotte region. The most important step you can take, experts say, is to have your pet neutered or spayed.
You also can adopt a pet, volunteer or give money to an animal welfare group. Some of the largest ones that operate in Charlotte-Mecklenburg are listed below. If you live outside Mecklenburg, check The Observer's regional publications today for a local list or www.charlotte.com. More agencies also can be found at www.petfinder.org.

ANIMAL ADOPTION LEAGUE
Mission: Fosters homeless and abused pets until they can find permanent homes (operates in Charlotte-Mecklenburg and York County, S.C.)
Address: P.O. Box 2453, Rock Hill, SC 29732
Phone: (803) 325-8282
Web: www.mynextpet.com

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG ANIMAL CONTROL
Mission: Impounds strays, issues pet licenses, investigates animal cruelty and operates city shelter
Shelter hours: Monday-Friday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Saturday-Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Address: 8315 Byrum Drive, Charlotte, NC 28217
Phone: (704) 336-3786
Web: www.charmeck.org/Departments/Animal+Control
To donate money: Send checks to Friends of Animal Control at P.O. Box 30484, Charlotte, NC 28230.
To volunteer: Call (704) 336-6694.

FRIENDS OF FERAL FELINES
Mission: Promotes the humane management of homeless feral cats by trapping them, sterilizing them and releasing them to their original environment
Address: P.O. Box 473385, Charlotte, NC 28247
Phone: (704) 348-1578
Web: www.friendsofferalfelines.org

HUMANE SOCIETY OF CHARLOTTE
Mission: Operates a no-kill shelter and a low-cost spay-neuter clinic
Shelter hours: Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Address: 2700 Toomey Ave., Charlotte, NC 28222
Phone: (704) 377-0534
Web: www.clthumane.org
To donate money: Send checks to P.O. Box 221028, Charlotte, NC 28222.

HUMANE SOCIETY OF MECKLENBURG COUNTY
Mission: Promotes and supports spaying and neutering as well as humane education
Address: P.O. Box 30484, Charlotte, NC 28230
Phone: (704) 533-0851
Web: www.humanesocietymeckco.org Under construction

PRECIOUS PAWS RESCUE
Mission: Rescues and fosters cocker spaniels and other small breeds and puts them up for adoption
Address: 9605-E N. Tryon Street, No. 118, Charlotte, NC 28262
Phone: (704) 509-9861
Web: preciouspawsrescue.com

PROJECT: HALO (HELPING ANIMALS LIVE ON)
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DEATH AT THE POUND

First of three parts

Sterilizing key to lower kill rate

Low-cost spay and neuter clinics making an impact across U.S.

By Michelle Crouch and Scott Dodd
Staff Writers

Even as their human populations have grown, communities across the country have reduced the number of homeless and unwanted animals – and the number killed.

The key is pet sterilization, especially in low-income areas, say leaders in those cities and national experts. Aggressive adoption efforts and public education campaigns also help, but don't solve the problem.

"We can't adopt our way out of euthanasia," said Kate Pullen, director of animal sheltering issues for the Humane Society of the United States. "But we can spay and neuter our way out."

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But a few communities are making progress.

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It's worked: The percentage of animals killed at the county shelter plunged from 91 percent in 1998 to about 49 percent today.

Moore County, home to the golf resort town of Pinehurst, kills a similarly low number of its animals. Animal advocates there say a partnership between animal control and the local humane society are behind its success.

The humane society operates a sterilization program for pets of low-income owners and traps and neuters feral cats. And Moore's Animal Control bureau offers programs not found in most counties around Charlotte: microchips for shelter animals, off-site adoption fairs and seven-day-a-week shelter hours. The county also built a new, $700,000 shelter last year.

With a budget of $527,000, Moore County's animal control department is spending $6.82 per person – almost one and a half times the average of $4.74 spent in the Charlotte region.

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Cage by cage, breath by breath, gas ends animals' lives

Many Carolinas counties use carbon monoxide due to cost

By Jennifer Talhelm
Staff Writer

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It was early morning at the shelter, and workers were picking over dozens of dogs, deciding which would live and which would die in the gas chamber that day.

For the boxer, it would end a hard life.

An officer bellowed over the barking, whining din, "All right, that's it." A whiskered muzzle poked out of an air hole in the mobile cage.

The worker rolled the cage down the hall and into a carbon monoxide chamber the size of a large oven at the rear of the shelter. He sealed the door, set a timer and eyed the gauges as the chamber filled with invisible gas.

After about five minutes, the dogs began to yelp. The cage shook a little. Then it went quiet. One dog moved its leg rhythmically. A few minutes later, everything was still. When the cart was wheeled out, the dogs lay in a furry heap.

Carbon monoxide poisoning is painless when carried out properly, according to veterinarians and the Humane Society of the United States. And the yelps, they believe, are not an indication of pain, but an involuntary reaction.

But shelter director Steve Rolan said workers never get used to the cries of dying dogs. "It's tough," he said. "We've had guys … just be in tears."

Carbon monoxide gas displaces oxygen in the blood, the animal loses consciousness and dies, said Rock Hill veterinarian Bert Platt. The animals aren't suffocating, he said; the cries are similar to people moaning in their sleep. Dogs sometimes make such noises coming out of anesthesia, he said.

DIEDRA LAIRD – STAFF PHOTO

Chief animal control officer Roger Bradley wheels dead cats out of the carbon monoxide chamber the morning they were gassed. York County (S.C.) Animal Shelter employees kill animals at 8 a.m. Fridays.

Although vets and the Humane Society recommend lethal injection euthanasia, for many counties, gas is cheaper and more efficient. When injection is used, animals must be killed one by one, and the staff must be qualified to give the shot.

For the dogs in York County's gas chamber that Friday, death came after about five or 10 minutes. But the animals stayed in the chamber for 15 minutes after the gas reached the necessary levels, as required by law.

Afterward, the shelter's part-time vet checked each dog with a stethoscope to make sure it was dead. "Everybody's gone," he said to no one in particular.

After the chamber was emptied, a silent load of cats was wheeled in. As the gas was pumped in, most lay down and went quiet, as if they were sleeping. But one kept standing, looked at an observer through the chamber window, swayed a bit and then toppled over stiffly. Its leg pulsed a few times and then stopped.

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But while the two dogs got a reprieve, most get put to death not long after their five days are up. About 600 dogs and cats are put to death at the shelter each month.

"It's a difficult thing to do," said assistant public works director Jerry Wilson. "It's unfortunately necessary because we just get so many animals. If people would just spay and neuter them, we wouldn't have to do it."

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