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Animal shelter euthanasia footage raises hackles

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LAS CRUCES - Dr. Beth Vesco-Mock, director of the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley, was hoping to devote some television time to an Independence Day \$17.76 adoption special and a record-breaking intake of 1,600 adoptable animals when she reached out to local media.

She showed a TV crew a litter of puppies "sweet as pumpkin pie" - and then another worker arrived with two more dogs, and no room to put them. She instructed another shelter employee to take a pitbull-mix mother who'd been in ailing health and put her down.

When the cameraman asked if he could film the euthanasia, she agreed - just last year, a TV news special had done a segment on the issue of overcrowding and euthanasia.

That decision has since deluged Vesco-Mock in anger, most vocally from Albuquerque-based New Mexico Pets ALIVE!, accusing Vesco-Mock of staging a "stunt" and demanding she be fired.

Michel Meunier, director of ACTION Programs for Animals in Las Cruces, signed on board to the criticism, saying the news segment was just the latest way Vesco-Mock "has failed miserably" at her job.

"New, fresh, positive management" is what the shelter needs, Meunier said. "I think we've gotten as far as we're going to get with our current shelter management."

But the board in charge of the local animal shelter has no plans to fire Vesco-Mock - and other local animal advocates are applauding her efforts, saying a shock might just be what area residents need to understand the problem of

pet overpopulation.

"Unfortunately, it's a reality of what occurs in this building," Vesco-Mock said Friday, adding that she

would not bar future filming of euthanasias.

The Spay and Neuter Action Program says that's the right attitude to have.

"I think that was the best thing that ever happened; their showing the euthanasia of an animal," said SNAP president Sherry Gara. "What do they want us to do with all the animals? Really, we take in almost 17,000 a year. What should we do? Do you think Dr. Beth looks forward to euthanasia? It's not a fun thing for a dog or a cat to be taken out of a cage, wagging its tail and thinking, 'Oh, someone's going to play with me!'"

"I love the idea of 'no-kill' (shelters), but they pick and choose what animals come into the shelter and we can't do that. We have to take in every animal that animal control takes in. I think we have to let people know that these animals die and they go into plastic bags and they go into the freezer and they go into the landfill."

Chris Wydra, an independent animal advocate who has been rescuing for 30 years, said while she calls the images "terribly sad and upsetting," she believes "if people could see the anguish they cause by not getting their animal spayed or neutered, it might help motivate them to take responsibility for all these unwanted animals."

Seeing a euthanasia is painful to watch, but it's even more painful for employees who have to do it every day, Wydra said, and Vesco-Mock has done her best to make that the last resort - hosting constant off-side adoption events and working seven days a



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week, often late into the night.

"The shelter is the last dumping ground for all these darling, unwanted animals of people who will let someone else kill them and it falls onto her and a staff and you can't tell me those people aren't affected by it," Wydra said. "People need to realize that this is our backyard. These are our animals. And this is happening every day."

About 1,100 other animals had to be euthanized in June because there was no room at the underfunded shelter and not enough adoptions, according to Vesco-Mock.

"We have a paper with all of the other options to call, and we tell (people giving us animals) the euthanasia rate in the summer is very high - cats, it's 80 percent," Vesco-Mock said. "I'm sorry. I happen to be a huge cat lover. I'm sorry. If they still choose to leave them, we can't turn them down. I'm sorry. We can't turn them down, but it is what it is. I've come in here trying to change. I want to be transparent."

While it wasn't her idea to have the procedure taped, "I'm not ashamed about how we did the procedure. I'm very sorry it had to occur."

No matter how it occurred, Meunier said Vesco-Mock should take responsibility for the segment.

"We're not saying there's not a problem, we're not saying there's not irresponsibility," she said. "What you need to do is engage the animal-loving public in a variety of ways. I understand the news people come in and say, 'Can I film that?' I would say no. You still give the permission to do that."

But County Commissioner Billy Garrett, chairman of the shelter oversight board, said terminating Vesco-Mock is not something any of the members have suggested.

"I can understand the concern, the pain that seeing an animal be killed brings to people," Garrett said. "I understand that. That's one of the reasons that the board has been working with Dr. Beth and Dr. Beth has been taking the lead in the community to reduce the number of animals euthanized at the shelter."

Since Vesco-Mock took the helm at the shelter, euthanasias have actually "dropped significantly," from 60.2 percent of shelter animals in 2009 to

55.8 percent in 2010.

The community doesn't need a new shelter director, but rather more residents stepping up to spay or neuter their animals and adopt those who are at the shelter, Garrett said.

"We need for owners to take care of their animals and not turn them in or abandon them," Garrett said. "We need rescue organizations to step up. The number of animals that are actually adopted or taken in by rescue organizations is only a small fraction of the animals that come in, and that's a community problem. That's what Dr. Beth has been working on. She's doing a good job."

People need to understand that if they give their animals to a public shelter that can not turn them away, that the shelter will have to convince someone to adopt them or kill them, he said. And maybe, if people see what happens, they will think twice before giving up an animal or allowing their animals to breed.

"I completely understand the anguish that I think those pictures brought on," Garrett said. "I hope what that will do is galvanize the community to work together to reduce the animals that go to the shelter, because if people were taking care of their animals, we wouldn't have that many animals going into the shelter."

Killing animals is a community problem, he said.

"Dr. Beth has been doing a great job and I support her and I support what her staff is doing," Garrett



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said. "They have an incredibly difficult job to do. I think they do it in a compassionate way. And if people are upset at seeing the truth, I hope they'll find a constructive way to deal with that feeling."

Ashley Meeks can be reached at (575) 541-5462.

Quick look

Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley in 2010:

- 8,347 animals euthanized
- 2,584 animals adopted
- 1,981 animals reclaimed by owners
- 780 animals transferred to pet rescue groups
- 435 animals arrived at shelter dead
- 258 animals died in shelter
- 72 animals stolen or went missing from shelter
- 21 animals (wildlife) that were released

Source: Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley

Want to adopt?

- When: Noon to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, noon to 4:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday
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