No easy solution for shelter

JESSE WRIGHT/The Clarksdale Press Register

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Two non-aggressive dogs have their heads buried in their food bowls on Friday morning. Most kennels at the shelter house two dogs, but not all of them like to share when it comes to food.

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By JESSE Wright The Press Register | 2 comments

At 8:30 a.m. last Friday, a county inmate fed dogs at the animal shelter. The man, dressed in county –issued green and white striped pants and a plain white t-shirt, held a water hose in one hand and a pan of food in the other.

The outdoor dog kennels have chain link walls and a gate. The dogs have a dog house, if the weather turns severe, but otherwise they’re exposed. Most of the kennels hold at least two dogs. Each morning the kennels are spray cleaned with a brisk stream of hose water. Then the animals are fed.

When the inmate opens the gate, the dogs, tails wagging, jump up at the food. He slides one pan to one side of the kennel and then another pan to the other side of the kennel. Most of the dogs break away from each other, run to a pan and wolf down their chow. But the dog in the first kennel, a medium sized black mutt, is food aggressive and he darts from pan to pan, gorging himself. His kennelmate, a smaller black dog, looks on and, every so often, will try to slip in and grab a mouthful of food. When he does, the bigger dog nips at the small dog, and barks and growls. The small dog backs away.

The inmate aims the garden hose at the aggressive dog and squeezes the spray handle. A jet of water splashes across the dog’s muzzle and he backs away until the water stops. He
waits, then, a second later, he continues his harassment. The inmate sprays him again. And again. At last the kennel is soaked and what’s left of the food is soggy mush.

The director of the Clarksdale and Coahoma Animal Shelter, Neighotti Ramsey, said this happens every day. He doesn’t like the food aggression. He doesn’t like that the inmate has to spray the animals down, or that they’re kept outside, two to a kennel. But, if his budget doesn’t increase, he doesn’t know what else to do.

“I love running the place. I’m an animal lover,” he said. “I have two dogs of my own. It’s not the job that’s frustrating, but the people you have to deal with and all the politics.”

The politics have gotten so heated that, in the past six weeks, a group of citizens have incorporated CARES, the Clarksdale Animal Rescue Effort and Shelter, a nonprofit group to raise money for a new shelter and take the city and county out of the shelter business altogether.

CARES still has a ways to go before ground can be broken on a new facility. The group needs money, they need the cooperation of the city and the county and they need land. City attorney Curtis Boschert says that they would probably support a nonprofit takeover of the shelter, but there’s still the matter of land, and money and the question of what will happen to the existing shelter in the meantime.

“Obviously we’re not trying to take over the donations that would be going to the current shelter,” said Cynthia Mitchell, president of CARES. “We realize those animals have needs. But we do need funds for our effort.”

At present, the animal control officer (Ramsey) is funded by the police department at a cost of $43,208 per year. This includes benefits, uniforms, insurance and job supplies. Even with new shelter management, the city might continue to pay for an officer. The cost of the shelter itself is split between the county and city at a (rough) cost of $30,000, although the city pays a bit more to cover insurance and utility bills and the shelter can also use whatever donations it gets to fund itself. Last year, with donations and receipts from adoptions and other miscellany, the shelter’s budget was $42,245.

Ramsey says this isn’t enough. He, too, depends on community donations and lately they’ve been on the decline. The current shelter is big enough for about 65 animals and it typically pushes capacity. The only employees are Ramsey, who acts as director and as animal control officer, and his sister, whom he hired as part time help.

“I have a few people who come to do community service,” he said. “Most of them show up, but some don’t. It can be a headache working with them sometimes.” In addition he has two county inmates at a time who show up every day and one “really active volunteer.”

Ramsey started at the shelter almost two years ago. At the time, he was unemployed and he heard the police department was hiring an animal control officer. So, loving dogs, he
decided to apply. Four months later, he became the director of the shelter. Now, he says, he’s working two jobs at once.

“When I took up animal control, I didn’t know what I was getting into,” Ramsey said. “I get more calls about dogs than the police do. I didn’t know it’d be like that.”

As the animal control officer, Ramsey is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week every day of the year. The only animal control training he received was early on, and it didn’t last long.

“When I first came here, the previous animal control officer gave me a little bit of training. That lasted a week,” he said. “That’s it.”

The training did not include anything about how to social dogs or reduce incidents of food aggression. It did not include anything about shelter management or veterinary science and Ramsey said he’s never been asked or required to attend extra trainings or complete online classes.

Police Chief Greg Hoskins said that training animals is beyond the shelter’s purview.

“We don’t have funds to send the dogs to obedience school,” he said. “That’s not a long term residency for the animals anyway. We like to get them in and get them out as soon as we get them in.”

Anyway, he says Ramsey has had additional job training.

“We’ve got him certified with a Taser,” said Hoskins. “That way he can use a Taser as opposed to kill a dog.”

Even for the best behaved dogs and cats, shelter policy requires euthanasia for animals left after seven days. But Ramsey hates the policy, and so he doesn’t follow it.

“We have animals that have been here half a year and they’re still here,” he said. “I’m not a cruel person. I go against our own policy. I don’t like that policy. Seven days is not enough time to get an animal adopted.”

Ramsey says that if he had a million dollars, he’d build an enclosure large enough to house all the animals. He says he’d buy all the vaccinations and medicines other shelters have and he’d get the animals vaccinated against rabies and parvo and all the rest.

At present, Ramsey said he didn’t think any of the animals were vaccinated and the only spayed or neutered animals came to him that way. Of course, Ramsey does not have a million dollars. According to the city clerk’s office, last year public donations came to $1,300. That’s about 7 boxes of Parvo vaccine.
Mitchell said her group has spoken with architects and gotten plans designed and, in the coming months, they plan to begin fundraising in earnest. She will target corporate donors, but she expects much of the money to come from local sources and so a new shelter is probably years away.

“I think if we can get it all together and get a new shelter, it’ll benefit everyone in the community, both the animals and the people,” said Mitchell. “Nobody likes to see dogs running in the streets starving.”

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