

# S.A. SCENE

## Discarded

S.A.'s unwanted animals and the volunteers committed to saving them

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Seized horse  
suffering from  
sunburn  
Courtesy of  
Meadow Haven  
Horse Rescue



A rescued dog with mange  
Courtesy of San Antonio  
Humane Society

A puppy on his way to a better life  
Courtesy of San Antonio Humane Society



The San Antonio area's neglected animals are lucky. There are champions fighting on their behalf. From the abused to the stray dogs and cats roaming our city streets to the farm animals abandoned in rural pastures, many dedicated local organizations are working to improve their lives. These groups' ability to be effective is largely determined by where the animal is found. In spite of all the hard work, there remain sad tales of animal cruelty. Fortunately, the less-than-ideal outcomes are numbering fewer and area animals are receiving a second chance at having a home and family to care for them. Though many groups have made

# DISCARDED, NOT FORGOTTEN

*The Future of San Antonio's Unwanted Animals*

BY PAMELA ATHERTON

impressive achievements in a short amount of time, in their opinions, there is still room for improvement.

In a recent scenario, Sheriff's deputies responded to a call regarding abused and neglected horses. They found 16 starving animals, left without food or water, in a pasture grazed down to dirt. Further inspection of the property revealed that help didn't come soon enough for three other horses. Meadow Haven Horse Rescue, based in Nixon, Texas, removed the surviving animals with a court order. Under Texas Penal Code 42.09, the animals' owner is charged with one count of animal cruelty, a Class A misdemeanor. After arriving at the horse rescue farm, one of the 16 died, its extreme starvation too advanced to respond to care. Other horses underwent treatment for the open wounds of sunburn, which will take months to heal.

In other situations, horse owners are allowed to voluntarily turn over their neglected animals to a rescue organization. Those surrenders preempt any legal action being levied against the animals' owners and absolve them from the financial burden for the immediate veterinary services as well as the animals' future care. The owners are also free to continue purchasing new



Extreme starvation seen in recent San Antonio horse seizure  
Courtesy of Meadow Haven Horse Rescue

stock. It's a too familiar scenario for Darla Cherry, executive director of Meadow Haven Horse Rescue. In response to the history of minimal punishments given to animal owners, they authored a petition, currently with over 15,000 signatures, asking for a review of Texas' animal cruelty laws.

"I'm glad we won the horses. I want to save as many as I can," Cherry said. "But the one charge of animal cruelty isn't enough. The law needs to be strengthened and we'd like for the animal owner's to pay surrender fees for the horses' veterinary bills and feed."

Meadow Haven Horse Rescue intends to pursue their petition when the next Texas legislative session commences. Until then, they are meeting individually with Representatives from around the state. "Texas is the largest state of animal owners," explained Cherry. "These changes can happen here. We've been contacted by other states that have learned about the petition. They tell us that their laws have changed. For them, it's one strike and you're in trouble, not three. Our plan is to get the laws changed and then ask the counties to improve enforcing them."

MHHR currently shelters 150

horses, all available for permanent or foster homes. "We would love to get more adoptions for the horses," Cherry said. "Most people with land have all the animals they can handle."

In addition to issues directly related to neglect, the City of San Antonio's Animal Care Services notes an increase in the stray horse population that developed from rising feed costs. Owners who can no longer care for their horses or donkeys are letting the animals loose on the streets. ACS added a corral to their facilities in order to serve the approximate 100 equines they receive per year.

Abuse and neglect cases reported within city limits are investigated by ACS. No matter the size or the species of an animal, investigations follow a standard process where they collect evidence and photos of the animal's condition as well as take witness statements. "Every case is different and while we follow a procedure, we handle each situation on an individual basis," explained Audra Houghton, ACS animal cruelty specialist. "Pets fall under property laws. When we investigate, we are held to a standard of 'not what we know but what we can prove.' We must gauge the pet owner's willingness to cooperate. The large majority is willing to work with us."

If the investigator feels an owner is unlikely to comply or if a follow-up visit proves they failed to follow ACS recommendations, the investigator will remove the animal, give a citation, and forward the case to the District Attorney's office for prosecution.

Educating animal owners and sharing information about general pet care and the availability of low-cost spay or neuter options and shot clinics is a large part of an animal cruelty investigator's job. They receive training in crisis intervention because many of the pet owners the investigators encounter are traumatized by the visit. "Some of the people we see are afraid of law enforcement," Houghton said. "Others still see ACS as the pound where animals go to die."

The modern version of Animal Care Services is a city department focused on improving the lives of animals. In 2006, the city adopted a no-kill initiative based on the successful methods employed in other urban communities. ACS's focus moved from routine euthanasia towards improving stray animal control and enforcement and increasing the numbers of healthy, live animals released for adoption, transfer to other animal rescues, or return to their owners. Before this initiative was established, ACS euthanized any animal for which there was no room to house. Prior to this change in policy, only 10 percent of animals impounded by ACS were live released or transferred to one of the area's rescue shelters.



This animal was rescued but didn't survive. Courtesy of Meadow Haven Horse Rescue.

A rescued dog with mange  
Courtesy of San Antonio  
Humane Society



The tipping point between live releases and euthanasia came an impressive five years later. In 2011, for the first time in the city's history, live releases outnumbered euthanized animals. Currently in 2013, ACS has live released 83 percent of its animals, and the community area wide initiative, including all of the area's supporting shelters, has released 86 percent of their animals. This progress is due, in large part, to a strong partnership between the city and the local organizations dedicated to the animals' well being.

ACS's biggest partnership is with the San Antonio Area Foundation SAAF, an organization that helps local donors achieve their charitable goals. "The San Antonio Area Foundation got involved in the no-kill initiative in 2007 when the city started funding

for education awareness," explained Gavin Nichols, program officer for Talk About It! SA, a campaign of the San Antonio Area Foundation and supported by the Animal No-Kill Consortium of Partners. "SAAF has provided grants for no-kill related projects. We've granted over \$5 million since 2007."

Here's one example of how their association is working. For several weeks before ACS plans to collect strays from one of the city's neighborhoods, Talk About It! SA places posters in the area advertising their mission, "Care. Adopt. Neuter." with information to assist pet owners in locating low cost or free spay/neuter or vaccination clinics, whatever the area pets might need. Two weeks before any impoundment begins, ACS block walks the area with more information on pet care and reminds residents that they will return to clear the neighborhood of strays.

While no hard data is available

on the success of this aspect of the partnership, there is much observational support of the program. In the areas where this plan has been implemented, there are fewer animals roaming the streets, less being hit by cars, and less ACS impoundment. Further, ACS has noticed that the animals that do arrive at their facility are healthier than before the partnership, making them a better fit for the no-kill initiative.

"Our plan," said Nichols, "is for all healthy animals to be live released from ACS. Then we'll focus on strays. We want there to be no more homeless pets."

These are common goals of the area's small animal rescue shelters but they appreciate the efforts undertaken on a statewide platform. "Anything that causes lawmakers to review the current law, like Meadow Haven's petition, that's a good sign for us," said Seamus Nelson, director of communications for the San Antonio Humane Society. "Animals need to be treated with compassion and respect."

As one of several partners participating with Talk About It! SA and ACS, the San Antonio Humane Society believes community outreach is integral towards the success of the partnership's shared vision. SAHS is an animal shelter adopting out dogs and cats though a significant portion of their work focuses on teaching the community at large. With the realization that everyone can have a different understanding of what owning a pet means, SAHS uses a broad based approach to target the city's population. They can be found sharing information in shopping malls, at wellness expos, and at local places of employment. They also reach out to our younger citizens with an education coordinator visiting schools to teach children about pet care.

Between local policy transformations, grass root efforts to educate, and petitions to review and improve current laws, the future is bright for our area animal population. The understanding of responsible ownership is changing whether for farm animals or small animals. With this focus on bettering the lives of pets, there could be an even larger positive effect. "Teaching a person to show compassion to an animal can transfer to our human interactions," Nelson concluded. 🐾