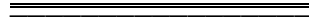


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**Law Enforcement and Animal Control**



**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

With ever-increasing demands being placed on law-enforcement officers and administrators, animal control divisions, commonly attached to police departments, are left without the attention and oversight they need to succeed. Placing animal control under the command of police administrators creates several issues for both the police and animal control officers. Police departments should not be in command of animal control and animal shelters. Police personnel lack the training and knowledge required to provide oversight to animal control, and it is increasingly difficult for police administrators to allocate enough time for proper supervision of shelters and animal control officers. Placing animal control and animal shelters under police administration is an outdated and unnecessary undertaking.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction .....	1
Position .....	2
Counter Arguments .....	6
Recommendation .....	8
References .....	11

## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement and animal control are linked together in many departments across the country. It is a partnership that has, in the past, worked for both agencies. It is time to re-consider this topic, and go another direction. There is supporting evidence that shows why police departments should not be in command of animal control and animal shelters. For example, according to a 2015 poll released by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), law enforcement officers lack resources and training to properly address dog fighting (ASPCA, 2015). This is a specific example, one of many, that sheds light on the issue of why these two agencies should not be linked together. In today's climate of tensions surrounding law enforcement, it is not fair to animal control professionals that they have to answer to police administrators that have neither the time, nor the skills required to properly oversee the day to day operations of animal control and animal shelters.

Operating an animal shelter is a complicated undertaking that necessitates the input of staff, volunteers, and veterinarians. To effectively satisfy the rising demand for better preventative healthcare programs and veterinary services for animal shelters, veterinarians must understand the mission and goal of animal shelters and the resources available to them (Miller, 2007). Law enforcement is far removed from the kind of expertise required to ensure animals are receiving the best care possible while confined to a shelter (Texas Penal Code § 823.003). The very nature of having a shelter lends itself to being a highly emotional cause near and dear to the hearts of both staff and volunteers. This can lead to complaints directed at law enforcement administrators, who can quickly find themselves searching for answers to problems they are not trained

to handle. Many animal control divisions and animal shelters are under the supervision of command level police officers who also oversee such divisions as communications, criminal investigations, evidence, and patrol. A police administrator who is involved in investigating a serious crime might discover that city council has been receiving complaints about the city shelter, and they now are forced to allocate time and resources toward the shelter issue, rather than the crime being investigated. This is not an ideal situation for the police department or animal control, and one reason police departments should not be in command of these operations.

## **POSITION**

It is in the best interest of both police departments and animal control that there be a separation between the two. Police personnel lack the training and knowledge to oversee animal control, as noted above. With today's well-documented struggles to maintain proper staffing in police departments, it is difficult for police administrators to allocate enough time for proper day to day oversight of animal control and animal shelters ("Police shortages hit," 2017). This makes it unnecessary to have police oversight with animal control. Animal control officers and supervisors have progressed in their field drastically over the years. From humble beginnings in 1824, beginning with the Society for the Prevention of Animal Cruelty dedicated to the welfare of animals, to 1929 when the first guide dog school, The Seeing Eye, was started, to 1980 when People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) was formed, animal welfare has progressed in awareness and knowledge of animal welfare has come a long way (MacKay, 2017).

The City of El Paso, Texas has a long history of animal control being moved from

one department administration to another. Going back to 1916, newspapers and city officials became concerned with health hazards relating to stray dogs (Bond, 1989). Employees titled “dog catchers” were under the supervision of the city sanitation commissioner (Bond, 1989).

Modern day requirements to become an animal control officer are much more stringent than in the past. According to the Texas Health and Safety Code, a person may not perform the duties of an animal control officer (ACO) unless they complete a basic animal control course within the first year of employment as an ACO (Texas Health and Safety Code § 829). An ACO must also complete 30 hours of continuing education during each three-year period following completion of their animal control course (Texas Health and Safety Code § 829). This basic course is mandated to cover numerous aspects of animal control, including animal shelter operations and administration. This training, along with partnering with professionals like veterinarians, Humane Society workers, and animal welfare advocates, makes the partnership with police departments unnecessary. Police administrators generally do not go through any of these required courses, and do not share in the day to day experience of animal control officers. This makes communication with ACOs difficult and time consuming.

The foundational background police administrators share with police officers under their command simply does not exist with animal control staff, veterinarians, and volunteers. Animal control and animal shelters require much more than simply interacting with animals. Also of high importance is the regular maintenance and upkeep of existing infrastructure needed to house animals, especially in the case of animal shelters. Certified veterinarians conduct inspections on shelters, and the

requirements to obtain a passing grade on these inspections are, by necessity, quite rigid. These inspections are required annually (Texas Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). A failing grade on an inspection will no doubt cause a social media storm, and will certainly create challenges to any municipality. A public works director is quite frankly more qualified than a police administrator to oversee such operations and ensure the buildings are up to code. Police administrators have spent a career in law enforcement building on a foundation of patrol, crime prevention, investigations, and crime analysis. A public works director can usually be found working on projects community wide, not the least of which is building standards and maintenance. Animal control supervisors would have a much easier path to success with an administrator that was at ease dealing with such issues. Too often, an ACO supervisor will have unfruitful meetings with a police administrator when dealing with capitol project concerns. This can lead to frustration and costly mistakes. Inevitably, help is sought out from other departments within the city with better expertise in this field. This is a waste of valuable time and resources, two items which many municipalities have little to spare.

The days in which shelters could operate in near anonymity are long gone. There are now many different agencies with an interest in every shelter that is in operation. Organizations such as The United States Humane Society, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Animal Justice Project, Cruelty Free International, and Eleventh Hour for Animals are organized, mobile, and vocal about animal welfare, as are the volunteers at animal shelters. A recent investigation in the city of Florence, Texas serves as an example. An animal cruelty complaint originating from the Texas

Department of State Health Services kicked off an investigation leading to the removal of nearly one hundred animals, mostly cats, from the R.U.G. Activity Center Animal Shelter located in the city (Bien & Rangel, 2017) Negative publicity that can occur from a failed inspections and poor management should be avoided if at all possible. This is better accomplished when animal control and animal shelters fall under a more suitable administration.

Other changes in animal control and animal shelter management continue to help progress in the field. Microchipping pets is now a reality in even small town shelters. The International Standards Organization (ISO) has helped make global standards for microchipping a reality by adopting a standard microchip about the size of a grain of rice (AVMA, 2018). This can be a very valuable tool in quickly reuniting lost pets with their owners, resulting in less time spent at the shelter. Social media sites are an inexpensive way to reach a large percentage of the community effectively. Citizens who observe a loose dog can take a picture with their smart phone, and let entire sections of town know the dog is in a particular area. This has been a benefit to municipalities in that if the owner is notified that their dog is out, it can be brought home before even visiting the local shelter. Shelter staffs have utilized social media by posting dogs and cats who are currently at the facility, and letting the citizens see exactly what kind of animals are currently up for adoption. This is often the first resource pet owners look to if their pet has gone missing.

Shelter employees and volunteers have gotten creative in their use of social media. Some have begun a “pet-of-the-week” program, which features a different dog or cat available for adoption every week. Others have advertised the time and location



of upcoming adoption drives at various city locations. New technology has allowed animal control to use social media to tell the story of how a particular animal came to be at the shelter in the first place, and how long they have had to be there. Employees can access veterinary assistance, ask advice of experts at the Humane Society, and even receive donations all online. This is an efficient, cost-effective medium that requires little to no administrative assistance.

There are some challenges that can arise from social media as well. Shelter volunteers and visitors that are unhappy with conditions at the facility can go online and, within minutes, reach thousands of citizens with their complaints. This can, and almost certainly will, find its way to city management. A city manager, along with city council members will want quick, factual information regarding the complaints. This can lead a police administrator to set aside what they are working on, however important it may be, and address the issue. Resolving complaints about animal shelters can be a time-consuming, complicated matter. A police administrator could find themselves calling contractors for estimates on building repairs, reaching out to experts on rabies quarantine concerns, or finding a new vendor to provide specialized foods for dogs with sensitive dieting needs. A simple comment on social media that took two minutes to post could mean two weeks of work for a police administrator that is also engaged in solving and preventing crime in the city (Romero, 2016).

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

There are those that believe animal control and animal shelters work best when under the command of police agencies. A popular thought is that because many animal control officers issue citations and can assist in animal cruelty investigations, they are a

natural fit under police command. The belief is that it makes perfect sense for someone who wears a badge and uniform, as many ACOs do, to answer directly to law enforcement professionals. The rebuttal would be that other municipal employees, such as code enforcement officials, can be found issuing citations and court summons on a daily basis and are rarely found under police administration. Certainly other municipal employees wear a badge and uniform, like firefighters, and do not report to police.

Another item some would argue would be that animal control personnel, usually with small staffs, lack the time, manpower, and resources to conduct budget processes and perform other administrative duties. Animal control, and shelter employees, they would argue, should be allowed to focus on the task at hand, rather than having to allocate time in the office building at a computer figuring out a way to stretch a tight budget or perform building inspections to ensure they are up to state standards. This is actually a valid point and one that merits consideration; however, the issue is not that animal control should be its own department. The issue is what division is best for animal control to be under. The perfect fit for municipal animal control and animal shelter administration is too often simply placed under police command without careful consideration about what is best for the staff and the animals under their care. The old adage “we have always done it that way” is dangerous thinking, and could lead to significant problems.

Many police departments operate under a para-military model of command. This can sometimes be the worst possible situation for animal control employees and agencies that assist them. A police administrator that has spent twenty years directing subordinates in this style can unintentionally lead to serious misunderstandings when

interacting with animal rights advocacy groups and citizen shelter volunteers. A public works director, conversely, likely possesses good experience with citizens concerned with city infrastructure.

Finally, it can certainly be argued that change can be difficult. If a municipality has had animal control and animal shelter responsibilities under police command for a long time, city management may not want make a change. If the municipality has never experienced major concerns, city officials may have difficulty finding a reason to restructure the animal control division. This requires forward-thinking and progressive leadership. City management must be able to think critically about each of the departments under their watch. They must be able ask the tough questions that may bring uncomfortable answers. Conversations need to happen that bring this important topic out in the open. Animal control and animal shelters have certain liability issues that need to be handled properly, or unwanted negative publicity can happen quickly. No city manager or mayor wants to field a phone call informing them that an animal rights group is upset with local shelter conditions and is planning a protest event in their city. This can be avoided with the right people in the right places.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Police department administration is not the ideal division to lead animal control and animal shelter employees in this modern era. It is time to reconsider what is best for animal related issues within a municipality, and that includes taking a hard look at which department should be performing the day-to-day tasks of administrative duties. City managers and council members must lead the way in reassessing this critical component of the community. Police administrators, likewise, should evaluate the

manpower and time concern issues that come with being over animal control and animal shelters. Conversations need to occur with animal control professionals, as well as animal welfare groups, to ascertain their opinions on what type of administration is best suited to lead them.

For reasons previously stated, city leaders should consider public works directors as a possible replacement to police command, as many cities already do place animal control and animal shelters under their direction. A quick internet search will reveal a number of cities in Texas have taken this direction. The cities of Pharr, Mercedes, and Helotes are a few examples. Other cities, like Groves, Texas have placed animal control under the fire chief's administration. Still others, like Hutto and Cedar Park utilize their respective county facilities for their animal shelter needs.

Management of animal control and animal shelters can come from various avenues. Simply placing them or leaving them under police command is ill-advised for city leaders trying to find progressive ways to guide their communities in the best way possible. A careful consideration of the matter should include talks with agencies that interact with animal services. The Humane Society of the United States has a staff that is more than capable in helping to guide city management in making these important decisions. Local veterinarians possess a wealth of knowledge and education that could prove very useful in the process. City leaders should also consider reaching out to their contemporaries in other municipalities and discovering what has been successful and what has failed. City council members who might have contact with a variety of politicians in different governments should be encouraged to bring this issue to the forefront of their discussions. The information and advice received in this type of

interaction could prove vital in determining the course of action for a municipality.

Police departments do many things for the communities in which they are based. They are tasked with several very important functions such as crime prevention, investigation, reporting and analysis, traffic control, evidence and property management, and many others. Animal control and animal shelters are being done a disservice, as are police departments, when they are combined under the same command. It is simply an outdated and unnecessary undertaking that needs serious reconsideration. When advancement in animal control services is combined with new and difficult challenges facing law enforcement, it becomes evident that the two agencies have no common goals or business interacting with each other on a day to day basis. The partnership between police departments is outdated, and unnecessary. It is time for a separation, and time for a new direction.

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