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Huntsville animal advocacy group pushes ordinance to cut down on euthanasia at shelter

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Colby was a 1-year-old at the Huntsville animal shelter. (Huntsville Animal Services)

By **Scott Turner | sturner@al.com**

An animal advocacy group is pushing for an ordinance it believes will cut down on euthanasia at the Huntsville shelter.

The ordinance - called the Huntsville Animal Protection Act [HAPA] – would codify some of the operations of Huntsville Animal Services, according to Aubrie Kavanaugh of No Kill Huntsville.

The euthanasia rate at Huntsville animal shelter was higher than normal during the summer, Animal Services Director Karen Sheppard told The Lede last month. She said dog adoptions had been sluggish.

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Animal Services made an appeal for adoptions and fostering over the holidays, which Sheppard said was effective. But she said the shelter was again full this week.

"We've seen a pretty substantial drop in the live release rate at the shelter," Kavanaugh said. "We think a lot of it has to do with euthanasia decisions."

In 2021, Animal Services had a clearance rate of 95%. Sheppard was hoping to get 2022's rate up to 88% by year's end.

Kavanaugh said the proposed ordinance has provisions about euthanasia, "particularly euthanasia of what we call behavior dogs, which are dogs that do poorly in that type of environment."

It would place conditions on which animals can be euthanized.

The ordinance would also have Animal Services "scanning more than once for a microchip to help find an owner," she said.

Additionally, the proposed ordinance would also waive fees.

"If they're getting ready to end the life of an animal just because they haven't been reclaimed where the owner can't afford the fee that's been assessed, we're asking the city to just waive that," Kavanaugh said. "It costs money to euthanize an animal, so why not just waive the fee and get that animal back home?"

She said the ordinance has "common sense" provisions about animal care, which include providing appropriate food, having accessible water and having care planned by a licensed veterinarian.

Kavanaugh said the ordinance would also include a provision for lost and found lists to help people find a lost pet.

"We're filling in gaps in existing code," she said.

Kavanaugh said much of the operation of Animal Services is codified in Chapter 5 of the city code. It includes provisions her group sought when it initially pushed for a HAPA ordinance in 2018. She said her organization got about 60-70% of what it wanted when revisions were made to the code.

"It's scattered now throughout the city code," she said. "Things like standards for dogs who live habitually outside and things like how the city handles free roaming cats, which are sometimes called community cats. Not every cat we see outside is a pet. Some of them are actually part of the ecosystem like a squirrel."

Kavanaugh said Animal Services improved from 2015 through 2021 in keeping animals alive.

"Now that four years have passed, we're taking another swing," she said. "We are seeking the provisions that we didn't get in 2018."

Kavanaugh said nothing in the ordinance proposal is "controversial."

"We think it's all quite reasonable," she said. "The key from where we sit is that it is not going to cost anything. None of this calls for an expenditure on behalf of the city."

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Kavanaugh said No Kill Huntsville members have discussed the ordinance with members of the city council and other city officials. She said the organization is looking for a sponsor.

District 4 City Councilman Bill Kling and District 2 City Councilman David Little said the proposed ordinance has merit. Kling said he was taking \$25,000 of his city council member discretionary fund, and appropriating it to Animal Services to be used specifically for actions and activities that will increase adoptions and reduce euthanasia.

Kling said he told Animal Services to use the funding in any way in those areas.

"One possibility would be to use it for extra personnel time for adoption events throughout the community, or extra nighttime and/or weekend hours at the animal shelter," he said.

In addition to pushing the proposed ordinance, No Kill Huntsville is also changes to the hours at the shelter to make them more adoption friendly. Kavanaugh said the group is asking for the shelter to shift hours, not increase them.

"We honestly believe the shelter hours are an incredible impediment to the operation of that department," she said. "We don't expect the shelter to be like other departments in the public safety realm like fire and rescue and police and be open all of the time, but if it's only open when people are at work, it really makes it hard for people to reclaim a pet or adopt a new one."

According to the city of Huntsville website, the shelter is open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. It is open 9 a.m.-6 p.m. on Tuesday and 9 a.m.-3 p.m. on Saturdays.

"The only way to help people get their lost pets back or to adopt a new pet is to have the shelter open for when families can actually get there," Kavanaugh said. "The hours need to change. We've been asking for that since 2014."

Kavanaugh said the group would also like Animal Services to use its GIS interactive map on its website that indicates where dogs and cats are found and hold outreach in areas where the majority of intakes are located.

On average, Animal Services takes in about 281 dogs a month. There were more than 80 dogs at the shelter in December 2022. The intake in cats is more seasonable because of breeding. More cats are usually taken into the shelter during the summer, although the shelter was overrun with cats as recently as November.

The shelter is located at 4950 Triana Blvd. in Huntsville. For more information, call 256-883-3782, visit [HuntsvilleAL.gov/Animal](https://www.huntsvilleal.gov/Animal) or the Huntsville Animal Services Facebook page. Pets available for adoption can be viewed on the Huntsville Animal Services website.

Scott Turner reports from Huntsville for the Lede.

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