

ACCES for Pet Health

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Animal Control: Beyond the "dog catcher"

By Jean Maixner, DVM

They are educators, mediators, public health protectors, social service watch guards, law enforcement agents and guardians of the most innocent; these are the good men and women who work in animal shelters and who serve as animal control officers.



Animal Control Officers are respectable civil servants.
Image from [naughty dog band](#)

Twenty-five years ago they were "the dog catcher"; they captured our pets and took them to the "pound". Dogs were in holding cells for 72 hours and then euthanized if no owner came forward. Over the years, as the bond between pets and people has grown, society has developed a sense of responsibility toward domestic and companion animals. We as a society have charged government agencies and local shelters to do more and be more than a dog-catcher and a holding cell. Our animal control officers and shelter workers have embraced this challenge and have elevated their service to a profession. They are humane officers; professionals, many who are trained in animal behavior, zoonotic diseases, shelter operation, law enforcement, disaster response, mediation, evidence collection, interview techniques, legal proceedings and crisis intervention.

A humane officer's sensibilities require courage, calm and compassion. One minute they may be talking with an irate owner who would prefer to release Cujo on them rather than talk, and the next minute they may be listening to a child who has lost a kitten. They may be removing a six-foot alligator from an apartment, and turn around to teach a dog class. These officers can arrive at a house to rescue an abused pet only to find a battered child clinging to that pet.

The animal facilities have also been transformed from bleak buildings functioning as holding cells to clean structures serving as safe havens where animals are fostered, socialized and adopted to loving families. These facilities have classrooms to teach the public about responsible pet ownership. Many have onsite veterinary teams trained in shelter medicine. In addition to spaying, neutering and vaccinating, these teams address shelter disease control, treat the housed animals and are first responders during natural disasters.

We expect our local governments to provide services to care for the lost, the homeless and the unwanted pet. We expect them to protect our society against public health threats and social injustices by providing officers who are trained in categories from infectious disease to criminal investigations. We expect the animals they care for to be provided veterinary care and a clean, safe socializing environment.

Can you imagine your city without an animal control agency? Who would take care of the stray animals, the abused pets and the puppy mill victims? How would you locate the owner of a stray puppy? Who would you call if your dog ran off during a thunder storm?

Local animal control agencies must be supported by veterinarians and the pet owning community and the best way to support these agencies is through pet licensing. The licensing fees help to fund animal control agencies. These funds reunite pets with families, protect the abused, house the unwanted, protect society and allow the officers to do what they do well.

Please license your pet and encourage your others to license their pets. Support this dedicated group of professionals, the humane officers, as they protect us, our society as well as our pets.

Seattle residents can purchase or renew their pet license via the [Seattle Animal Shelter](#).



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