Several times a week, residents phone Animal Control to come pick up an unwanted pet. Some officers have the owner put the animal in the truck.

Story by SARAH SUE GOLDSMITH/Photos by GUY REYNOLDS

Advocate staff

Animal Control blames irresponsible pet owners for having to kill 7,000 animals a year

The end of the line

Gus was an adorable puppy. His satiny chocolate coat rippled as he lumbered over to one of the kids for a little romp. His tongue lolled comically, and he learned to bark in his puppy way in response to his humans. They even encouraged it, thought it was cute.

But Gus grew up. A 65-pound barking lummox is a different matter from a cute, rambunctious puppy. Gus' family didn't want him anymore. Who would want a big, uncontrollable, barking dog?

Cleo was a beautiful shaded silver Persian kitten, a little ball of fur that loved to chase anything that moved. Then Cleo became an adult Persian cat that needed to be brushed every day. When she wasn't properly groomed, her long hair became matted. Her humans were fed up. Then Cleo came in season, got out of the house and produced a litter of kittens. That's it, her humans decided. We don't need all this trouble.

Gus and Cleo (and her seven kittens) were taken to the Animal Control Center. The end of the line.

In both examples, it was not the animals that were to blame for their march down death row. It was their owners' lack of responsibility. Why didn't Gus' family take him to obedience school? Why didn't Cleo's family do a little research before choosing a cat? They would have learned that Persians require more attention than shorthaired cats. They would have learned personality traits of different breeds of cats and could have made a better choice — for them and for the cat. These thoughts go through the minds of Animal Control employees every day.

Both families left it up to Animal Control to find homes for their unwanted pets. If they had seen how many other dogs, cats, puppies and kittens were already in residence, they would have known their pets had little chance of being adopted.

Five days a week, Animal Control employees carry out the grisly task of euthanizing dogs and cats. Frequently the people who drop them off know exactly what will happen. Other times, they pretend everything will be fine.

"You aren't going to kill him, are you?" one young woman asked as she deposited a stray kitten. He had appeared at her door, hoping for food and comfort. Nobody wanted the little yellow-and-white fluff ball. There are more fluff balls than homes available.

Pet overpopulation is a nationwide problem, not just in Baton Rouge. Look at the newspaper ads for free puppies and kittens and you begin to see the problem.

"Spaying and neutering is imperative if we're going to cut down on the pet overpopulation," says Hilton Cole, director of the East Baton Rouge Parish Animal Control Center.

"People bring in a carton of puppies, and they know they will probably be euthanized. Eighty percent (last year it was 90 percent) will not find a home, but bringing them here is better than letting them go on the street."

The daily numbers are staggering.

June 4: Animal Control took in (either as strays or by owner release) 52 cats (of which 32 were kittens) and 41 dogs (including 29 puppies). July 12: 38 cats and 49 dogs. July 16: 34 cats and 32 dogs. Fill in the days between with similar numbers.

The statistics are grim. Thirteen million pets are euthanized annually.

"And these are the ones we know of," says Cole, "not the ones that are dumped on the side of the road, abandoned, neglected. I don't think a lot of people realize there is a pet overpopulation problem."

At the front desk, a woman and a girl of 8 or 9 learn that to bail out the little girl's cat, they will have to pay $62: $25 first-offense fine for an unconfined animal, $25 for five days' boarding fees and $12 for rabies license and vaccination.

The girl is tearful. Her mother is angry.

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When a pregnant dog is brought to the shelter, puppies are born there and die there.

Bird. It's less expensive, more efficient, less painful. It's easier to introduce, and there are several routes of use — dogs, cats, and wildlife.

Since it is a Schedule 2 narcotic, employees have to be licensed to use it. "We're being licensed by the Drug Enforcement Administration and the state Department of Health and Hospitals and the board of veterinary examiners. This is definitely the way that shelters and humane societies should go. Training is imperative. We're trying to upgrade and improve humane societies in the United States." After animals are euthanized, they are "unceremoniously dumped in a landfill and covered up with bulldozers."

Pets come in to the animal shelter for four ways:

- Strays — The parish leash law makes it illegal for dogs or cats to roam the streets. When an owner goes to Animal Control to retrieve a pet, he must pay a $25 fine for breaking the law.
- Owner-signed releasing — When the owner signs a release, Animal Control holds the pet for 24 hours in case the owner changes his mind and wants his pet back. Then the pet is put up for adoption or euthanized. "The local attitude unfortunately has to play God. He goes down the aisle and looks at them for personality, appearance, etc." The lucky ones are dewormed, vaccinated and moved to the adoption area where they wait one to two weeks, hoping someone will want to take them home.
- Abandoned animals — 10-day observation period for ranges, then euthanized if not picked up by owners.
- Abandoned animals — "People have moved away and left dogs in the back yard, eating their puppies, themselves, cannibals," says Cole.

Adoptions are infrequent. There are not enough homes, and people don't want to pay the adoption fee, Cole says. "It is imperative that only responsible people adopt animals. They will be willing to pay the fee and have the animal spayed or neutered."

A good animal control program, says Cole, seeks to reduce cruelty and suffering and pet overpopulation and to increase responsible pet ownership. The three-pronged program includes:

- Legislation — strong animal control ordinances.
- Education — spay/neuter to prevent pet overpopulation.
- Litigation — pet owners are expected to pay a fine if their animals are not vaccinated, licensed and confined.

"Animal control is basically a law enforcement organization. I would like to see CAAWS pushing the educational aspect more than we can. It is up to the veterinarians to stress the advantages of having an animal sterilized."

How do Animal Control employees deal with death day after day?

"You know that when you come in here that's part of the day," says Richard G. Edward, who's worked there since 1969. "Somebody has to do it, and it's better for someone who cares to do it," says Lavinia Wood. "Everybody comes with it in their own way. You get a shell around you that protects you. The problem comes when the shell gets too hard. I cried almost continuously the first two years I worked here."

"To help them as long as I can, to give them the best care I can before their deaths," says Linda Vaughan.

"I am. Please!" says Cole. "We live in a 'throw-away' society," says Wood. "People dispose of pets like you would shoes. If you don't think of an animal as a feeling, thinking individual with its own personality, there is no easy way to throw them away. Cats and dogs are classified as property, not as animals."

"I feel it's a tragic situation today, says the one that broke her heart and don't respect life, you don't respect it."

"What do Animal Control employees face all day long? Mass murderers — like David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam. They come in as animals when they were younger. When you speak to a pet sickly and you respect it, whether it's 2-legged or 4-legged."

"At the other end of the spectrum, you get people who do nothing, a lot, to put their own, reverence for living, reverence for things God put on this earth — at home.

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"Everybody works here would love to walk in one day and be told, 'Here's your pink slip. We don't need you anymore. We don't want you anymore.'"

"But I can't take them." says Cole. "I can't take them; digging in the sand (mainly boredom); jumping up on the kids (how animal obedience training); redecorating the living room and the cat doesn't match the new decor (someone really said that)."

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Wood has three dogs and three cats of her own; her roommate has four dogs and a cat. When an elderly labrador retriever was brought in, "I fell in love with it, adopted it myself." It lives with a friend of Wood's, and she pays the veterinary bills for it.

All of the Animal Control employees interviewed have several pets at home that they say are members of their families.

Dr. James M. Morris, who teaches at the LSU School of Veterinary Medicine, makes regular visits, helps out with special problems. "These folks are to be admired. I don't know how they do it." Animal Control is "part of a block that I teach. Students come out here to work. Twenty-nine years ago we were teaching owner education. We're still teaching it. I've got no answers. I've got no solutions other than spay, neuter and confinement."

Veterinarians can't solve the problem on their own, "Nobody wants to face a problem this size that has gone on as long as it has," Morris says. "Confinement works mightily well. If you've got a cat you want to breed, keep it in."

"People lie," says Vaughn. "They bring in nice dogs because they're tired of them. They say they're strays. That means we have to keep them seven days. If they'd just tell us they own them and sign a release, we would have a chance to put them up for adoption. But after a week, especially with kittens and puppies so susceptible to illness, they're likely to get sick" and then have to be euthanized.

People don't have any idea what it's like to see all these animals dumped at Animal Control — a few for valid reasons like allergies or not being able to afford euthanasia for a sick animal through a veterinarian, Wood says.

Other reasons include: barking (training needed); urinating on carpet (Vaughn asks, "You use a litter box?" "No, it smells." "How would you like for your commode to be stopped up?"); a baby on the way; fleas (Vaughn: "You ever dip your dog or spray the yard?" "Too much trouble."); worms (treatable); don't want them anymore (Vaughn: "I think, 'Will you give your kids away when you decide you don't want them?'"); stupid dog (Vaughn: "What's he doing?" "Nothing. Just sits there. Put a leash on him and he goes stone crazy." "Eight months old and never been on a leash before." "Put him to sleep.").

Are there any rewards to this job? "In this line of work, there is no reward," Vaughn says.

"Staying awake at night hearing an animal scream is no reward. "Not being able to eat supper because you've seen so much death is no reward. "Doctors' visits because you suffer so much stress."

"Keeping Sominex on hand so you can get a decent night's sleep..."

Helping doomed animals have the easiest death possible is the only thing that keeps her going, she says. Other employees say they feel the same way.

"If we don't have each other for moral support, the public sure isn't going to give it to us," Vaughn says bitterly.

Most of the facility is off limits to the public. "I'd love to run tours," Wood says, to make people see the reality of pet overpopulation.

"People do such stupid things, and they call us murderers," says Vaughn. "Fifteen to 20 times a day, somebody says, 'Oh, I could never have your job. I love animals too much. Well, I love animals, too. That lady with the basket of kittens... Or somebody holding a big cat in her arms and saying it's not her cat... If they'd do their jobs (as responsible pet owners), I wouldn't have to do mine."

"Sometimes when I see a dog wag its tail just as I'm injecting him, I want to quit," says Wood, her voice breaking.
Another load of dead dogs and cats is dumped unceremoniously at Devil’s Swamp landfill, the final resting place for thousands of animals per year.