

Partnering for Pets and People

A collaborative effort between animal control and law enforcement reaps rewards

BY MATTHEW PEPPER



Accompanied by county commissioner Art De La Cruz (in blue) and local children and pets, Matthew Pepper announces the opening of a dog park in Bernalillo County.

At some point in our life, most of us have moved furniture, whether it's shoving a couch up three flights of stairs into a new apartment or getting the new refrigerator from the garage into the kitchen. It is possible to do alone, but is considerably easier and more effective with many hands chipping in.

Investigating animal cruelty and neglect works best the same way. Of course, there's a certain level of independence necessary in our profession—we need to be able to independently investigate and resolve cases that are presented to us. Like any type of law enforcement, much of what we do is reactive. However, when looking at causes and long-term solutions to these issues, it's clear that a more proactive response is frequently appropriate. And a proactive approach to animal cruelty is accomplished more effectively and

efficiently through sound partnerships and collaborations.

In 2012, Bernalillo County, N.M., formally announced the formation of an animal cruelty task force known as the P.E.T. (Proactive Enforcement Team) Project. The idea came about in the same manner as most good collaborations—through communication. Lt. Andi Taylor of the Sheriff's Department shared my passion for animals, and what started as just the two of us having casual conversations about cases gradually involved into something more formal. During their daily briefings, our officers were invited to share experiences or information with deputies, and they would openly discuss animals they encountered during the course of their jobs.

Those early conversations led directly to the realization that, while our jobs often

entail significantly different functions, our worlds are intertwined. By now, most animal control professionals know about the link between animal cruelty and human violence, and more standard law enforcement personnel have become aware as well. Unfortunately, to most law enforcement personnel, the connection remains theoretical, just a concept they have read about, until they confront the reality.

That reality hit home over the course of a few months in early 2012, when the leadership of Bernalillo County Animal Care Services (of which I am the director) and the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Department began regularly debriefing over calls to which we have responded. The Bernalillo County Sheriff's Department is a high-volume office, and the deputies are constantly on the move. Getting their leadership and deputies to stop by on a regular basis proved easy, though, when we suggested they help us bottle-feed Ferdinand, a young calf we'd rescued after he'd been abandoned in the Pajarito Mesa outside of town. At any given time one, two or even three deputies would stop in to help with Ferdinand or just see how he was doing.

As you might suspect, we found out that in many cases, the people that Animal Care Services were investigating were the same people the Sheriff's Department was investigating. The people that Animal Care Services looked at for animal neglect were often the same people the Sheriff's Department was investigating for child neglect. The people Animal Care Services looked at for animals at large, bite investigations and other issues were often the same people the Sheriff's Department was looking at for drug charges, assaults and gang affiliations. Theory had become reality.

The partnership that developed was an obvious benefit to Animal Care Services through the integration of our resources and knowledge base with the resources and authority of the Sheriff's Department. It was successful for the Sheriff's Department as well: It was addressing a problem and impacting public safety in a positive way. The Sheriff's Department also got a good boost in public relations—people love stories about work that helps animals or children, and this collaboration helps both. Not only was the collaboration an effective law-enforcement tool, but it showed a softer, more compassionate side of the Sheriff's Department.

The truth is that most people know animal abuse and neglect when they see it. When I teach animal cruelty investigations to law enforcement, I typically start with the principle of “If it doesn't seem right, it probably isn't. Call someone.” That is really the only level of awareness needed for success. That said, in 2012, with the blessing of the sheriff, all road patrol deputies and certain special functions were required to take a course in animal behavior and animal cruelty investigations. The training was certified through the state Department of Public Safety for continuing education and therefore met a training requirement for the deputies.

The impact of the course was immediate and positive. In the past, due to a lack of awareness of animal behavior, there were some instances when deputies encountered dangerous or aggressive dogs, and felt they had no choice but to use lethal force to protect themselves. But since this course was held, providing the deputies with a better understanding of dog behavior, not a single dog has been shot by deputies responding to calls for service. In addition,

the level of interest and concern over animal issues from the deputies increased dramatically. Almost overnight, we began working more closely with deputies, and obtaining more firm and effective results. People talk in Albuquerque's South Valley, and when the first person was handcuffed and hauled away to jail for animal cruelty, people paid attention.

After the training, 27 deputies signed up to be part of more formal efforts, the first being a sweep scheduled in a high-activity area for both Animal Care Services and the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Department. During that sweep, deputies and Animal Care Services officers walked in groups through the community, addressing issues they encountered. In addition to the animal-related concerns addressed during the sweep, deputies uncovered two drug issues, one individual with an outstanding warrant, and one child-abuse case—the latter of which only came to light after officers engaged the residents about the animal issues they'd found. This one case of child abuse discovered and addressed is enough to say the sweep was an overwhelming success.

In 2013, we welcomed the addition of another partner to the program: NMDOG,

a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping animals who have been subjected to cruelty or neglect. I have found in my almost 15 years in animal welfare that most—not all, but most—people want to be good people. They want to be good pet owners. Some may have antiquated concepts of animal care, but at heart they want to do the right thing. NMDOG provided the resources—such as leashes, food, training tools, toys, behavioral advice and, in a few instances, financial assistance for veterinary care—to those encountered during our sweeps.

Over the past two years the success of the P.E.T. program has continued to be evident in everything we do. It remains one of the most recognizable functions of both Animal Care Services and the Sheriff's Department. The program has proven to be not only an incredibly effective program for both departments, but also an incredibly positive public relations tool. The more we are in the eyes of the media, the more we are on the minds of our citizens, the more we are seen in our communities, the more educated our citizens become. This, after all, is perhaps the best possible result of our collaboration.

Every life is important to officers of Bernalillo County Animal Care Services and the deputies of the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Department. In instances of animal cruelty and neglect, animals are no longer seen as “just animals,” but are treated as living beings and given the care appropriate to those who've been victimized. The P.E.T. program demands—and inspires—justice for all victims in Bernalillo County. ■



A task force—including, from left, emergency manager Roger Tannen, animal control officer Aloha Campos, field supervisor Pat Trujillo, animal control officer Mario Jaramillo and director of animal care services Matthew Pepper—deployed to set up an emergency animal shelter after a series of wildfires hit the Pecos Canyon.

Matthew Pepper is the director of Bernalillo County Animal Care Services. He has more than 13 years of leadership experience in the field of animal care and control in both nonprofit and municipal capacities. He serves on the board of directors for the National Animal Control Association.