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Illinois bill would ban gas chambers for strays

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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Friday, Feb. 15 2008

In Illinois' Jefferson County, most cats and dogs that are not adopted at the county animal control agency are put down by lethal injection, a standard practice at government-operated shelters across the region.

There is, however, the occasional dog that's deemed aggressive. And sometimes the facility gets too crowded, so large groups of animals are euthanized all at once.

In these cases, the Mount Vernon shelter uses its gas chamber.

"We get a great deal of animals," said supervisor Ruth Hughes. "Sometimes it's easier to use gas. It doesn't tie up my people."

But many animal rights activists consider euthanasia by gas cruel and are demanding that the method be banned in Illinois.

A state representative from Chicago is sponsoring a bill that would bar the use of carbon monoxide and tighten restrictions on who is allowed to perform the killing. The proposal is supported by about a dozen animal rescue shelters across the state.

"(With gas), they don't die immediately, and being in an enclosure like that causes them stress and panic," said Jackie Spiker, co-founder of Hope Rescues, a "no-kill" shelter in Edwardsville. Spiker sometimes gets animals from the Mount Vernon facility.

Maryland, New Jersey and New Mexico already ban gas chambers, according to Chicago English Bulldog Rescue Inc., the lead supporter of the bill. Illinois and Missouri permit this form of euthanasia but have stipulations on the type of gas and chamber used.

Randy Grim from Stray Rescue of St. Louis said he hopes the ban passes in Illinois — and then catches on in Missouri.

He'll be campaigning for the bill with his dog Quentin, called the "miracle dog" for his famous survival of the St. Louis gas chamber in 2003. The Basenji-mix and seven other unwanted dogs were put in the chamber and gas was released. A shelter worker opened the door to find Quentin on top of a pile of dead dogs, wagging his tale.

Grim and Quentin travel across the state and country, encouraging city and county shelters to stop gassing pets.

"We don't put criminals in gas chambers because it's inhumane," Grim said. "It's not the animal's fault that it was abandoned."

Some animal advocates say it would be harder to ban the gas chamber in Missouri because lethal injections cost more than in Illinois; a veterinarian must administer or supervise the shot in Missouri, whereas a trained euthanasia technician is permitted to do so in Illinois.

West Plains, Mo., a city of about 10,000 in Howell County, uses gas because the alternative is too expensive. Animal control officer James Collins said the city's gas chamber broke a few years ago, and he switched to lethal injection for about 18 months until he found a new chamber in 2001; the city paid \$5,500 for veterinarian fees, which was about the same price as the new gas chamber.

Collins, who has been in his position for 30 years, said it can be difficult for small rural communities to get ahold of the vet, especially if there's only one within driving distance. He tranquilizes animals before putting them in the chamber and does his best to get them adopted or rescued by "no-kill" operations before they're destroyed. But Collins said the number of dogs brought to the shelter rises every year.

"I don't like having to put down animals; it's very stressful," he said. "But there are too many irresponsible people with animals out there."

Animal rights advocates and public officials across the region say it's impossible to know how many animals are gassed because county shelters are only required to report the number of deaths, not the manner in which the animal was destroyed.

Another issue is so-called "puppy mills," high-volume but substandard dog breeders that often produce more animals than they can sell. Commercial operations don't have to follow the same gas chamber restrictions imposed on shelters, nor are they held to the same reporting standards. Missouri has the most licensed commercial dog breeders in the country, but the industry is highly unregulated, according to a 2001 state audit.

The proposed Illinois ban on gas would apply to commercial breeders as well as shelters.

Some shelters in the region have already switched from gas to lethal injection after coming under fire from animal rights groups.

Clinton County in Illinois was caught in 2005 using a "homemade" gas chamber that lacked a window, a violation of state law. Animal control there now uses injections, and the old gas chamber has been turned into a storage facility.

The city of St. Louis banned gas chambers for animals in 2004, after Quentin's escape. St. Louis County, St. Charles County and Jefferson County, Missouri, have all used injections for years.

St. Clair County in Illinois stopped gassing stray cats and dogs in 1997 after the public learned more about the process: Cats used to be placed in a 55-gallon drum, dogs in a cement block structure; a tractor pumped gasoline engine exhaust into the respective death chambers.

The proposed Illinois legislation, sponsored by state Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago, would also bar anyone convicted of animal abuse felonies, bestiality or drug crimes from administering lethal injections. It would mandate a euthanasia technician get continuing education every five years, instead of the existing once-in-a-lifetime requirement. Any violations would be referred to local law enforcement or the Illinois State Police, as well as the local prosecutor or Illinois attorney general's office.

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