

New regulations for animal shelters under consideration

By **Billy Baker** | GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 07, 2013

A proposal to impose a host of new regulations on animal shelters and rescue organizations in Massachusetts has met stiff resistance, with many groups arguing that the restrictions will create more problems than they solve and carry financial burdens that could force some organizations out of business.

The state's Division of Animal Health, which has proposed the measures, said the broad goal is to control the spread of disease and the new regulations are not nearly as drastic as they're being portrayed.

Many of the new regulations deal with the transferring of ownership when an animal is adopted. The proposed regulations would ban the adoption of animals with contagious diseases or serious aggressive tendencies and require all animals to come with a disclosure statement detailing any medical or behavioral issues. Those with noncontagious medical conditions can be adopted, but must come with an estimate for the cost of treatment. And all animals must have a veterinarian-certified health certificate that has been signed no more than 30 days prior to the date of adoption.

Leslie Harris, the executive director of the Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society in Springfield, said that because so many animals spend more than 30 days in shelter care, the cost of paying for a second or third veterinary assessment for the same animal will have a serious financial impact on cash-strapped shelters. That single requirement, her group estimated, will cost \$109,000 to \$131,000 each year.

“These rules that will be put in place are cost-prohibitive for a lot of groups,” said Judy

Bredin-Graham, the president of New England Saint Rescue, which specializes in Saint Bernards. “They’ll shut down. They’ll go out of state to escape the regulations. Or they’ll go underground. And animals will die. There are bad groups, sure, but this wholesale painting us all with a broad brush is tiresome. We’re just trying to fulfill a societal responsibility.”

Shelters and rescue organizations operate under regulations contained in an emergency order implemented in 2005 after an uptick in the number of rescue organizations that were importing animals from Southern states that have pet overpopulation problems. A major measure in that order was the requirement that any animals coming from states that do not border Massachusetts must spend 48 hours in an isolation facility before adoption. That measure will continue under the new proposal.

Dr. Cynthia Cox, the head shelter veterinarian at the Massachusetts Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, said many of the proposed new regulations are too vague.

She also said the ban on adopting animals with contagious medical conditions would backfire and make more animals sick, citing studies that show illness in shelter animals is directly related to the amount of time they spend in the facility around a dense population of animals.

“So many cats have upper respiratory conditions that get activated at times of stress, like in a shelter,” she said. “Under the terms of these regulations, we wouldn’t be able to adopt them out. But you have to get them out of the shelter, out of the stressful situation, to get better. I think this is going to lead to a lot of animals getting unnecessarily euthanized.”

Within the proposed regulations are new guidelines for foster homes, which are a crucial part of smaller organizations that lack a shelter facility. Those providing foster care would have to be willing to open their home to inspectors, and comply with new regulations governing the care of the animals, such as a ban on carpeted flooring in areas where the animals will be kept, on the grounds that they cannot be easily

disinfected.

“It’s like they’re trying to make it as difficult as possible to work with organizations to adopt pets,” said Don Shapiro, whose family runs the Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem, a pioneer in the practice of importing animals from Southern shelters. “Foster caregivers are the most compassionate people around. They nurse an animal back to health, give it love and attention, then they’re forced to give it up once they’re attached to it. It’s hard to get these people, and if we’re saying to them your home is going to be open to inspection and follow these rigid rules, we’re not going to have foster caregivers.”

Mike Cahill, the director of the Division of Animal Health, which falls under the auspices of Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, said the new regulations are not all that different from the current regulations and are simply being organized in one place.

“It’s a scare thing,” Cahill said of the situation among shelter organizations now that the proposal is coming up for approval. “They’re misinforming people and getting them riled up and it’s obstructing the process.”

Cahill said he has been working on the new regulations for three years, and spent a year working on the language with many people in the shelter and rescue community.

“They’re saying it’s going to slow down the work they do,” he said. “If we can find an alternative to ensure that people receiving the animals are receiving a healthy animal, we’re open to it. But this makes perfect sense to me. If an animal has got an infectious disease, the last thing we want is to move it somewhere where it has an opportunity to infect more animals.”

The comment period for the proposal has been extended until Tuesday, and the final measure must get approval from the governor’s office.

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