

Success in South Florida

In Miami, Sara Pizano's focus on accountability reaps rewards



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Sara Pizano took her talents to Miami long before LeBron James. And while it remains to be seen whether James will transform basketball's Miami Heat into champions, it's safe to say Pizano has turned around the once-struggling Miami-Dade Animal Services Department.

A veterinarian and graduate of Cornell University, Pizano has directed the department since June 2005. She landed her current position as a result of a 2004 evaluation of

the department by The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), which put forth 578 recommendations for improvement—including the hiring of an experienced director. Pizano fit that bill, having spent five and a half years as director of veterinary services for the Humane Society of Broward County in Florida.

Miami-Dade has shown steady improvement since Pizano's hiring and the October 2005 move to make the

department, which previously had been run by the local police, a standalone entity answering to the county manager. Annual adoptions have risen from around 3,000 to more than 8,000, and the total number of animals saved (adopted, transferred to a rescue partner, or returned to their owners) has more than doubled. The Florida Animal Control Association named Miami-Dade the 2009 Animal Control Agency of the Year, and awarded the department

the 2010 Outstanding Team Achievement Award for collaborating on more than 4,000 cat sterilizations without affecting its operational budget.

In this edited interview with *Animal Sheltering* associate editor James Hettinger, Pizano discusses some of her trials and triumphs, and her approach to shelter management.

***Animal Sheltering*: When you took over, what were the conditions like?**

Sara Pizano: There were no pain medications. There was no management of the shelter population, so there was overcrowding and a very high infectious disease and mortality rate.

How did you go about establishing your priorities?

I had to think, what are the things I can fix now? For example, there was euthanasia of the animals who had adopters, so that had to stop first.

Why would animals who had adopters be euthanized?

Maybe they had coccidia. They weren't clinical or anything, but they just had coccidia. Adopters were not given an opportunity to adopt.

I had a 30 percent [staff] vacancy rate. The first thing to do was to hire a management team, and it actually ended up being a great thing that I had all those vacancies. To this day, I do every single interview, regardless of the position, because I want to hand-pick every person that comes on this team. I've probably done more than 400 interviews.

I want to make sure the staff knows my mission. And then you drill down and make sure the staff is, first of all, trained, knows what's expected of them, and then held accountable, which wasn't done before.

So at this point in time, over 75 percent of the staff are new with me.

There were some rough times in the beginning? There were even bomb threats?

I was not popular with the staff, because there were teams of [employees]—who are obviously no longer here—who were stealing animals. I came in and provided structure and



Sara Pizano, a veterinarian and director of the Miami-Dade Animal Services Department, took over a struggling agency in 2005 and has more than doubled its number of animals saved annually.

accountability, and they wanted me out. So there were four bomb threats that first year. We had to evacuate the building. I had to be escorted to my car when I left at the end of the day. I have panic buttons in my office. I was physically threatened by employees. I had to call the police to get them out of the building. It was a very ugly year.

When I got here, obviously I would do rounds a lot, and I noticed the dogs were huddled in the backs of the runs, shaking and really afraid. After about six months, I walked through the kennels and I realized all the dogs were running up to the front of the kennels, wagging their tails. I knew that we had reached a tipping point, especially with the kennel staff, because that [improvement] was in direct relation to how those animals were being treated. That was a huge epiphany for me—happy and sad at the same time.

What were some of the key policies you were trying to put into place?

In the beginning, it was really the flow of the animals through the shelter, because I look at the adoption area as prime real estate. That's where you want every single cage filled. And the thing is, I don't care if they have heart disease. You write on the cage card, "I have heart disease." So if there's a stray hold, and there's room in adoptions, who cares if they stay in adoptions but

are stray holds, as long as we have full disclosure? The main thing that I did right away was teach the staff how important the flow of the animals was, because the animals were getting stuck, and obviously we all know what happens then.

How did you get the staff to buy into what you were trying to do?

In a realistic way, they didn't have a choice, because there were euthanasias that shouldn't have happened. There were animals that could have been saved, potentially, so that's the common mission, that's the common goal, and if you'd like to work here, then that's gonna be your goal, too. And that's why, for me, it was so important to interview every person, because I want every single point of contact to be positive. So as you start hiring those team members that hear your mission and want to be a part of your mission, it kind of tips the scale.

We are not perfect. I still struggle every day here. I still have great challenges. There's still staff that are not where they need to be. But, for the most part, I think we've created a team that really does care for the animals. When you have a management team that understands that and buys into it, then that's going to trickle down to the line staff.

[q&a]

I imagine you had to cultivate relationships with other people in the community?

Yes, and that's one thing, I think, that surprised the staff initially. I remember one of the staff saying to me, "You know, Dr. Pizano, you let the media in, you interview all the time. Before, nobody would let the media in." And I said, "You know, when you're doing the right thing, then you're an open book, and you want the public to see what happens, because they're the ones that are going to change it." I want people to know that animals are euthanized here every day, and this community can change that.

I've established many partnerships. We have over 62 rescue partners. We have humane societies and rescue groups. We have partnerships with high schools, universities, technician programs, you name it. There were no volunteers when I got here, so I created the volunteer program in 2006. The volunteers, obviously, we couldn't do what we do without them. They're invaluable. The animals would not get the treatment that they do without the volunteers.

Animal services became a standalone department a few years ago. What impact has that had?

Well, before I came here, animal services was always under the umbrella of another department—health department, public works, police department—because nobody knows where to put animal services, because it's so unique. And part of the recommendation in the HSUS report was to have

the department answer directly to the county manager. So for me, it worked out beautifully, because the county manager is an animal lover. He wants to see things done right. He wants the department to succeed.

What are some of the challenges unique to your shelter and your community?

Certain things that we publish that have to be in three languages—English, Spanish, and Creole. But I would say 60 percent of our media outreach is in Spanish, because there's just such a huge Hispanic population here. One of the challenges is language. But the other is, Latin countries don't have the sheltering system that the United States has. So, for example, when they lose a dog, it's not their first thought to go to a shelter, because they don't know about shelters.

The [warm] climate, with cats reproducing, doesn't help, because it's a year-round problem.

And then, just the size: Our community is 2.4 million people. We're a 2,000-square-mile county. So the county continues to grow, as does the intake at animal services, unfortunately.

And then of course there's the financial side of it. We have no marketing budget. Everything we do is pro bono, and we probably get over \$100,000 of in-kind advertising, media time.

But of course it's not a focused, targeted market. It's basically whatever we can get for free. I still meet people who didn't even know where the shelter was, [had] never even heard of it.

We just continue to try desperately to keep the animals healthy in the shelter. But our problem is that a high percentage of pet owners don't vaccinate their puppies and dogs, and so they come into the shelter incubating distemper and parvo. It's just a vicious cycle.

Our building is archaic. It was built in the '60s, designed as an animal hospital. It in no way serves the purpose for what we do today. There's no air conditioning, and we're in Miami. The offices have air conditioning, and the lobby, but the

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animal spaces don't have air conditioning. It's the perfect storm, it's the perfect petri dish, for infectious diseases.

Do you have any universal advice that all shelters can benefit from?

It doesn't matter how many animals you handle or how big or small your shelter is, you have to have a really good management team and very clear standard operating procedures, so that there's consistency. With that, you provide the animals with the best care possible.

How is your budget situation generally?

As the department improves on every level, we've improved in just collecting money that was owed to us, which we were never good at. And so that allowed us to increase our budget from \$8.9 million to \$9.7 million this year. Everyone else had cuts. But the reason is, we did not have to depend on the general fund as much because we became better at generating our own revenue, and that's the secret. So, I got to add positions. I'm adding five kennel staff. I'm adding two technicians. That's huge for this day and time.

We do dog licensing, and that's another amazing area of opportunity. We only license 40 percent of the dogs, so right now we're really proactively working on capturing that other 60 percent.

Anything in particular that you're most proud of?

More than doubling the number of animals saved, I think, is the biggest accomplishment. [By] "saved" I mean adopted, went to rescue, or returned to their owners. Before I got here, it was 5,667, and this year was 13,942. I think that's really the biggest accomplishment. 

