As someone who has run both an all-volunteer humane society and a large, municipal animal control operation, I know about time crunches. Between outbreaks of ringworm, arranging foster homes, caring for litters of kittens, dealing with a hoarding situation, and handling veterinary bills, who has time to keep up with what’s going on with the local government and new laws that are being considered? Running an animal shelter means having to react to any number of crises each week, and it’s easy to be so consumed with the day-to-day operations that we don’t get to lift our heads up to see what’s going on around us.

But the consequences of that can be significant, particularly when it comes to legislation. There are countless examples of municipal or county ordinances or state laws that can greatly impact the animals in our communities and our shelters. Legislation governing everything from shelter hold lengths to chaining/tethering limits is debated at state and local levels, sometimes by people who may never have set foot in an animal shelter. Laws addressing the feeding of free-roaming cats may affect the ability of feral cat colony caretakers to perform their work, or limit the capacity of local animal care and control agencies to support them in it. Bonding and forfeiture laws can have a huge impact on the costs a shelter may face when dealing with a large-scale cruelty case.

In some states, the past decade has seen a push to eliminate euthanasia by gas chamber—a major leap forward and a goal all humane-minded individuals should support. However, laws that simply forbid the use of carbon monoxide for euthanasia do not address the method that must replace it: Humane euthanasia by injection is often only feasible when a state has comprehensive direct-licensing laws that allow shelter workers access to the drugs and training necessary to perform the procedure properly.

When it comes to legislation on euthanasia methods, the input of the staff of animal shelters—where the vast majority of animal euthanasia continues to be performed—can be vital to ensuring a law that makes sense and will prevent animal suffering. In 2009 in Virginia, for example, the state veterinarian changed the laws to allow for, and provide training and oversight of, lethal injection by animal shelter personnel.
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