There are rescues, and then there are rescues—for example, those that involve extreme weather and the seizure, triage, and sheltering of hundreds of animals from nearly a dozen species.

That’s the kind of rescue that took place earlier this year in Coryell County, Texas. Starting Jan. 31, and lasting three days, the Coryell County Sheriff’s Department, the Houston SPCA, and the Houston Zoo seized and transported more than 200 adult dogs and 40 puppies (most of the canines were rottweilers, but there were other breeds present), more than 30 horses and donkeys, 18 domestic cats, 10 rodents, five birds, a Savannah monitor (a desert reptile), one tammarin monkey—plus two Bengal tigers and two mountain lions. Nearly 70 of the more than 300 animals rescued were found living inside a three-bedroom house on the ranch property near Gatesville, including many crated dogs, a white-tailed deer in a cage, and a small raccoon. The rottweilers were kept in outdoor pens with sheds.

The owners’ intentions aren’t entirely clear, but Tara Yurkshat, the SPCA’s vice president of animal welfare, believes it was a breeding and boarding operation gone terribly wrong. Animals found on the property were living in very poor environmental conditions, and the home itself was deemed dangerous for humans and animals due to extremely high ammonia levels. Investigators also found several dead puppies and several others suffering from hypothermia. The two suspects initially faced 20 counts of animal cruelty and two environment-related counts, with the possibility of additional charges being filed.

Complicating the effort was an arctic cold front that blasted Texas, plunging temperatures into the low teens. And the rescue site was located about 250 miles away from Houston, a four and a half hour drive, much of it on rural, dirt roads.

“We’re able to deal with a large quantity of animals, we’re able to deal with the diversity of species, and we’re able to deal with exotics. [But] when you put those together at the same time, it develops a certain level of difficulty,” Charles Jansen, the Houston SPCA’s chief cruelty investigator, observes dryly.

The effort to rescue, transport, and ultimately place hundreds of domestic and exotic animals required a huge cooperative effort.

The Texas Wildlife Department was called in to rescue the white-tailed deer and the raccoon. The International Exotic Animal Sanctuary in Boyd, Texas, agreed to provide a home for the four big cats. The Savannah monitor went to a reptile rescue group. And the American Rottweiler Club’s Disaster Committee coordinated the placement of hundreds of rottweilers across the country.

“This became a humongous project in collaboration,” Yurkshat says. “It’s not unusual for Charles and his team to one day wake up and find that they’ve got a huge situation on their hands. [But] I think it is unusual for so many groups that don’t always necessarily work together to come together and say, ‘How do we make this work?’”
The operation started when the Coryell County Sheriff’s Department, facing a situation that outstripped its resources, contacted the SPCA for help. Jansen’s team arrived to assist with loading horses, but immediately saw that there was a much bigger task ahead.

Members of the SPCA’s staff established a game plan, and began to perform triage on the animals, process them, and load them for transport. Each day of the rescue, a transport went to the SPCA, where another team was standing by to offload the animals.

The SPCA contacted the Houston Zoo to request expert help with the four big cats—two male/female pairs. Joe Flanagan, the zoo’s director of veterinary services, was happy to assist, and he and three staff members—Maud Marin and Maryanne Tocidowski, associate veterinarians; and Kevin Hodge, supervisor of carnivores—helped in the rescue, medical care, and transport of the cats.

Marin had a particularly exhausting experience, says Flanagan. From the time she arrived at the property to assess the condition of the big cats, sedate them, load them, and accompany their transport back to the SPCA, she spent nearly 24 hours in bone-chilling weather. It was so cold, in fact, that the anesthetic agent in the darts she had planned to use to tranquilize the cats actually froze, and she had to prepare new ones.

Texas has a history of people keeping backyard tigers and bears—and, in one case, a chimpanzee in a garage—and the Houston SPCA’s facility was constructed with the caging to handle such cases. All the animals from Coryell County, including the tigers and mountain lions, were taken to the SPCA before foster care or final placement could be found. The SPCA and Flanagan decided that the best place for the big cats was the International Exotic Animal Sanctuary, located about 25 miles north of Fort Worth. After a Coryell County judge awarded custody on Feb. 23 of all the seized domestic and wild animals to the SPCA, zoo staff performed ultrasounds on the female cats to determine if they were pregnant (they weren’t), and sterilized the males. Then Hodge and Tocidowski accompanied the cats to their new home at the sanctuary.

To help with the huge task of placing the rottweilers, the shelter reached out to Lew Olson, chair of the American Rottweiler Club’s Disaster Committee, with whom they’d worked after Hurricane Ike struck Texas in 2008.

Olson contacted the club to share details of the situation. They agreed that the Coryell County rescue operation wasn’t a disaster in the usual sense—like the aftermath of a hurricane—but it was a disaster nonetheless. Olson and the club spread the word about the dogs to rescues across the nation, and soon offers to place the dogs in foster homes began to roll in. To fund the rehoming effort, Olson set up a PayPal account, and people around the country sent in checks. PetSmart Charities gave $10,000 to pay for medical care, as well as donating 150 dog crates.

Olson arranged to rent cargo vans and paid people to drive their own vehicles to transport the dogs to participating rescues. The outreach was successful: Olson was able to find foster homes for almost all the rottweilers.

Olson says working with the SPCA was a great experience. The shelter spayed and neutered all the dogs, vaccinated them, and fed and housed them while Olson looked for foster homes. “I was pleasantly surprised at how cooperative the SPCA was, and I think they were pleasantly surprised at how cooperative we were with them,” she says.

Yurkshat acknowledges that there’s often friction between rescue groups and shelters due to different philosophies about the best way to help animals, but in the Coryell County rescue, everything just worked. “I think that this shows that [animosity] doesn’t have to happen, and that we can work together.”

Apart from the collaboration of multiple partners, Yurkshat and Jensen credit the SPCA’s staff for their enormous contribution to the effort. Not only did they have to run the shelter’s day-to-day operations, caring for about 800 animals, they also had to absorb the sudden influx of 350 more. And their numbers continued to rise: About 70 puppies and five foals were subsequently born at the shelter.

Shift after shift of staff worked long hours to make the operation a success, and everyone at the SPCA contributed to the effort. “I think it’s noteworthy when—at 3 o’clock in the morning—the president of the organization [Patricia Mercer] is here to lend support to the team, and be there to help with the offloading of the big cats, and basically express to them that we’re all a part of this,” Yurkshat says.
The supportive board that regulates the municipal New Albany/Floyd County Animal Shelter in southern Indiana has an ongoing worry.

It’s not about the shelter’s budget, the standards of care, or its relationship with the community. Those things are all fine, as far as the board’s concerned. Rather, its five members fret that the shelter’s taking on too much.

“They say, ‘Are you sure you can handle this? We don’t want you to burn out,’” says David Hall, director. It’s easy to understand why the New Albany/Floyd County Animal Control Authority thinks Hall’s shelter has a lot on its plate. It does—and that’s the way Hall, and animal care coordinator Theresa Stilger, like it.

“I’m just a move-on-to-something-new kind of gal,” Stilger says, laughing. “It’s where we are and what we do. … The support of our community and our board makes a difference, in that they allow us to blossom and grow.”

Whenever an animal welfare organization—whether it’s a small, in-state dog rescue, another shelter, or The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS)—contacts Hall and his staff, they’re game to help—whether it’s testifying on pending legislation, taking in puppy mill or fighting dogs after a raid, or even crossing state lines to assist during disasters.

When heavy rains flooded the animal control shelter in Louisville, Ky., Pam Rogers, Kentucky state director for The HSUS, reached out to Hall immediately. Volunteers and animal control officers needed equipment like trucks and crates, and help evacuating nearly 500 pets from the building. “And here he comes, bringing some of his staff,” Rogers recalls.

Another time, Hall was happy to contribute equipment and staff to assist Rogers with a hoarding case in Breckinridge County, Ky. And Hall’s response when she asked him to drive three and a half hours to a western Kentucky shelter to show the ropes to a new director? “‘Sure, no problem,’” Rogers says.

Anne Sterling, Indiana state director for The HSUS, has had similar experiences with Hall and his team, who took in a handful of pit bulls after a dogfighting raid. And when she needed help setting up a temporary shelter before a puppy mill bust in southern Indiana, Sterling called Hall. His staff found a location, put her in touch with a local veterinarian so that the dogs could receive medical care, and took in some of the 233 dogs after the raid.

Hall and Stilger have also come to the General Assembly in Indianapolis to testify on issues such as dogfighting and puppy mills. “That’s kind of an unusual thing, when shelters will just drop everything to come and testify,” Sterling says. “It’s got to be hard to shake loose when you’ve got mouths to feed and day-to-day operations. The fact that they make it such a priority to come and do this, that really means a lot.”

The shelter has long been one to reach out. After Hurricane Katrina, seeing the devastation and feeling like his staff could do something to help, Hall got support from the New Albany/Floyd County Animal Control Authority, local government offi-
cials, and the community to partner with staff and volunteers from the Kentucky Humane Society in Louisville, sending a team to Hattiesburg, Miss., one week after the disaster. They drove a cargo van loaded with medical and cleaning supplies and bottled water, and once onsite, helped set up an emergency shelter, perform triage of the animals, walk dogs, feed pets, and clean up.

These days, Hall and his staff have their hands full caring for a steady stream of homeless animals. The shelter is addressing the problem at its root, through spay/neuter programs. The facility has its own clinic to provide veterinary care and ensure that every animal who leaves the shelter is spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and microchipped.

The shelter also operates a low-cost spay/neuter program for the community, called Fix Your Critter Day. The program was launched with a $30,000 grant from PetSmart Charities, awarded in 2007, that was divided equally among the shelter, the Floyd County Animal Rescue League, and the Floyd County Humane Society, two unsheltered nonprofits that provide financial support and volunteers to Hall’s facility. (Funding now comes from the city and county government, an anonymous donor, and the two nonprofits.) The rescue league runs its own low-cost spay/neuter program for cats, called Feline Fix, as well as a trap-neuter-release program. The humane society focuses its spay/neuter efforts on large-breed dogs.

Once a month, the shelter arranges a transport of 30 to 40 pets to the Kentucky Humane Society’s S.N.I.P. Clinic in Louisville. The animals stay overnight for surgery, then are returned to the shelter the next day, when their owners can pick them up. Grant funding enables those who cannot afford the low-cost vouchers to have their pets spayed or neutered for free.

From 2008 through 2010, the shelter, the rescue league, and the humane society have collectively spayed and neutered 3,350 cats and 1,300 dogs. An additional 4,250 shelter pets had spay/neuter surgery at the shelter’s in-house clinic.

Since the shelter and the two nonprofits began their cooperative spay/neuter efforts in 2008, intake numbers have declined 25 percent, according to Stilger. And this, Hall points out, was during a recession and a major housing crisis that left shelters across the country swamped with surrendered pets. “In an economy that’s in the tank—what do you think of that?” he says.

Municipal shelters often feel that they can’t launch a spay/neuter program for the community’s pets, because it could alienate the city’s veterinarians, according to Hall. But, cooperating with the two Floyd County nonprofits, Hall’s shelter has plunged ahead. “It really comes down to the support of your local government, and your governing board,” Stilger says. The shelter has partnered with the Floyd County Humane Society to kick off a pet identification awareness campaign, called Tags Take Me Home, designed to encourage owners to microchip their pets and have them wear collars and tags. Local children will compete in an art contest, drawing posters to illustrate the campaign; the winner will receive a savings bond and a presentation at the mayor’s office. The graphics from the winning entry will be made into a poster, which will be distributed throughout the community.

In 2010, the shelter’s return-to-owner rate for cats increased threefold—from 1 to 3 percent. “It sounds like nothing, but that’s 27 cats that went back home,” Stilger says. “And we’ve actually had some starting to come [into the shelter] wearing their city licenses that they get when they’re spayed or neutered.” It certainly helps that every animal who leaves the shelter is microchipped and wearing tags, she adds.

Hall and Stilger credit their community for their shelter’s success. “They’re supportive of our mission and what we do. They know that we want to take a stand against puppy mills, the dogfighting, and the animal abuse, that we want to place as many animals as possible,” Stilger says.

Hall downplays the praise that comes his way, thanks to his shelter’s repeated willingness to tackle challenges above and beyond its already substantial workload. “This is so confusing to me,” he says. “... I thought that’s why we were here.”

David Hall and Angel, a salmon-crested cockatoo—the shelter’s de facto mascot—have a stimulating conversation about current animal welfare issues. The demonstrative bird has been known to laugh, and yell at staff members.
And We’re Back

Telethons reap rewards, boost adoptions, and showcase shelter programs to the community

You might not savor Jerry Lewis’s over-the-top shtick—the tears and his signature, shaky rendition of “You’ll Never Walk Alone”—during the annual MDA (Muscular Dystrophy Association) Labor Day Telethon, but you’ve got to admit: The guy sure knows how to raise money for a cause.

While the longtime host’s—ahem—unique creative style might be open to debate, animal shelters in search of new fundraising ideas could actually learn a lot from what Lewis has accomplished for the organization: netting hundreds of millions of dollars in contributions since the telethon’s inception in 1952.

It’s possible some shelters around the country have been taking notes; at least a handful host their own telethons that reliably bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars to help support vital programs and services.

Of course, organizing such an event isn’t for everyone—if it were, there would be dozens of telethons across the nation, put on by shelters big and small, rural and urban, with deep pockets and shoestring budgets. But that’s not the case; there are a number of important factors that help determine if a telethon’s a realistic fundraiser for a shelter.

“It’s a tremendous amount of work, and you definitely want to see a return on investment,” says Barbara Baugnon, marketing/communications director for the Oregon Humane Society in Portland. “If you were in a small town, and the viewership would be low during the air time [the local TV station] would sell you, I would definitely look at that before pulling the trigger on this.” The cost of putting on a telethon—in the tens of thousands of dollars—the time commitment from staff and volunteers that’s needed, and the size of the potential viewership all pose challenges. That’s likely why, Baugnon says, she’s only heard of telethons being done in major metropolitan areas. (Her shelter’s 11th annual Telethon to End Petlessness last October raised about $290,000.)

One shelter that’s made it work is Lollypop Farm, the Humane Society of Greater Rochester (N.Y.). Staff and supporters had plenty to celebrate after its 15th annual telethon wrapped in March. A last-minute pledge of $40,000 from longtime supporter and local businessman Greg Polisseni made it the most successful event in the shelter’s history, raising $253,000—and blowing past the goal of $208,000.

Lollypop Farm got into the telethon business unexpectedly. A production company with experience running such events for shelters around the country approached Lollypop Farm with a potential sponsor and a significant grant already in hand, and offered its services for a fee. The shelter accepted the deal and used the production company’s out-of-the-box model for three or four years, before taking over all the responsibilities itself.

Having someone to show the shelter the ropes was key to starting a telethon, and keeping it going in the early years. “[It] wasn’t on our radar at all, and if it weren’t for the production company touting a big-name—at the time, Heinz—sponsor with them, we wouldn’t have had the gameness to try,” says Debra Calandrillo, Lollypop Farm’s special events manager, who’s now worked on five telethons. “Their providing the textbook of how to execute a telethon, as well as providing some financial assurance that we wouldn’t go belly up, took away the degree of risk that we likely would have been subjected to without both of these elements.”

The telethon is critical to Lollypop Farm’s bottom line; it’s the shelter’s biggest fundraiser of the year. But it takes a significant investment of time and effort—as well as $50,000 to $55,000 to pay for expenses—to get it off the ground each year. The team that’s needed to pull it off includes shelter staff, volunteers, corporate sponsors, a partnering TV station, and a videographer/producer to tape vignettes of “success story” adoptions and touting the shelter’s programs.

And once a telethon’s over, planning soon begins on the next one.

“Large-scale events are a challenge,” says Rick Gabrielson, vice president of development and communications at the Dumb Friends League in Denver. “It is a machine that kind of moves through the year. Right now, we’re working on two of them, and starting the telethon for next year.”
Is a Telethon Right for Your Shelter?

Debra Calandrillo, special events manager for Lollypop Farm, suggests that shelters thinking about holding a telethon consider the following:

- Most animal sheltering telethons take place in media markets much larger than Rochester; the size of the market and the potential viewership should be considered.
- Does your shelter have strong brand recognition and community awareness? Those factors can help make a telethon a success.
- It might take several years to reach the necessary level of financial support. Does your shelter have the financial strength and resolve needed to allow the event time to mature and reach its potential?
- Network with other shelters. Reach out to your local news stations to see what kind of support they might be willing to offer. Survey your supporters to see if they would be willing to donate to another fundraiser, or internally assess whether a telethon would attract new sponsors.
- Do you have volunteer videographers, photographers, etc., who could donate their services to keep your costs down? Do you have enough content to produce a multi-hour broadcast?
- Would adding one more event, especially of the size and complexity of a telethon, fry your staff, volunteers, and donors? Or could you potentially eliminate smaller, less popular events, and focus your efforts here?

Lollypop Farm’s telethon requires the efforts of about 30 people, starting six months before the broadcast, as well as 200 staff and volunteers pitching in the day of the show. “There are a lot of contributors here. … Part of the success is because everybody’s involved and sharing their expertise, and it makes it a much more fulfilling event,” Calandrillo says. Staff continuity makes the job easier; the longer a telethon has existed, the more seamless it is to organize each year. Kelley Hildmeyer of Video Hound Productions, for example, has been producing and directing Lollypop Farm’s broadcast since the very first show.

The telethon is a six-hour broadcast, from 3 to 9 p.m., with a half-hour break for the news. The shelter partners with WHAM-TV, the local ABC affiliate, which provides the hosts. The program is made up of live interviews, check presentations from corporate sponsors, and prepped video segments about shelter programs and some of the more than 11,000 animals that come through Lollypop Farm each year. Adoptable animals are also brought on camera.

The telethon takes place at Eastview Mall in Victor, a suburb of Rochester. Staff and volunteers arrange the sets, including the phone banks, in the mall’s main court. “I think that’s part of the reason for our success, is just the visibility of it. … We get to capitalize on people who may not even know about the telethon, but they stumble upon it that day,” Calandrillo says. Passersby can visit a “kissing booth,” where they can get a friendly lick from a dog or a miniature horse, or buy a few things from the Lollypop Shop, a table stocked with pet toys and other goodies. Corporate sponsors line the set, featuring their products and services; raffles are held, and donation collection sites are placed around the mall. “It’s a party-like atmosphere,” Calandrillo says.

The average donation is about $75, and the telethon attracts around 1,500 donations (not including corporate sponsors). Callers can use their credit cards to donate, or make a pledge and have the shelter mail them a bill after the telethon. A few years ago, the shelter started a program called Humane Heroes, which is specific to the telethon; callers agree to give $5 or more per month for one year, starting the month after the broadcast. The commitment is renewable at the next telethon. It enables people to give at a higher level than they could with a one-time donation, Calandrillo says.

The broadcast is streamed live on WHAM-TV’s website, so donors from outside the Rochester area can participate, too. Corporate sponsorships begin around $500, with a modest level of recognition, and go upward of $10,000 to $25,000. Sponsors at those levels, such as Hill’s Science Diet, can have sets made that include their own signage.

The results of a successful telethon can be eye-popping. The Dumb Friends League’s 13th annual telethon in January raised more than $300,000 for the shelter and helped get 69 pets adopted. And in March, the San Diego SPCA and Humane Society’s 14th annual telethon raised more than $192,000.

But the value of having a telethon goes beyond the raw numbers of how much money is brought in that day, or how many animals get adopted. It’s also about exposure. Lollypop Farm’s telethon influences viewers who watch it, according to Alice Calabrese, the shelter’s CEO/president. “[People think] ‘Wow, Lollypop has cute animals, they take good care of them, they get lots of services … with the adoptions.’ So it’s got a lot of spillover for a long time.”

Lollypop Farm's most recent telethon celebrate the event, which raised more than a quarter million dollars.
Puncturing the Puppy Mill Pipeline

Michigan resident targets pet stores supplied by unethical breeding operations

BY ARNA COHEN

In a city famous for heavy hitters like Henry Ford, Joe Louis, and the Detroit Tigers, the name Pam Sordyl may not get instant recognition. But among animal advocates, she’s known for delivering knockouts to a formidable opponent: puppy mills.

The indefatigable Flint, Mich., native has singlehandedly built a 360-person volunteer corps that hits the abusive industry where it hurts most—in its wallet. Come rain, snow, or shine, group members spend Saturdays conducting “Adopt, Don’t Shop” demonstrations outside pet stores that do business with puppy mills, which subject animals to desperate lives of confinement and neglect. Sordyl is racking up the wins: Since 2008, five of the puppy-selling pet stores she’s targeted have closed.

Laid off from her job as a General Motors financial analyst, Sordyl brings the full force of her business savvy to bear on the problem. Sparked by her attendance at the 2007 Taking Action for Animals conference sponsored by The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), her advocacy crystallized when she founded the Southeast Michigan Puppy Mill Awareness Meetup to protest a boutique pet store in Northville, a tony Detroit suburb.

Concerned that sign-carrying protestors might alienate residents of the upscale community, Sordyl decided to hold a parade instead. She mapped out the route, staging a two-person rehearsal to gauge reactions. “I’m definitely a planner,” Sordyl says. The store owner called the police, who told Sordyl to leave. She complied but was surprised when the officer followed her and apologized. “[He] said, ‘I actually saw this on TV . . . [My wife and I] know about puppy mills, and I don’t think [the owner] is on the up-and-up.’ He told us to come back.”

About 60 people turned out for the parade, accompanied by rescued dogs wearing “Priceless” price tags. So, too, did the police, who declined to intervene. Sordyl now regularly contacts local law enforcement beforehand to notify them of scheduled actions. “I’m all good with the sergeant,” she says, describing a town where she’s been protesting. “We e-mail, and he sends me nice thank-you notes.”

Sordyl employs the same due diligence in following the paper trail from pet store to puppy mill. She pores over purchasing records and U.S. Department of Agriculture inspection reports, and even travels out of state to document conditions at breeding facilities. One store owner insisted the dogs at his breeder’s had grass and shade trees. “But I know different,” says Sordyl. She has the horrible inspection reports and photographs of feces-laden wire cages to prove it.

Despite her knowledge of these horrors, Sordyl’s objective is not to put people out of business but to offer a humane alternative to selling puppy mill dogs. A negotiator, she writes letters, meets with owners to present her evidence, and volunteers to help replace puppy sales with in-store adoption events to bring in potential customers. But she doesn’t hesitate to take action when necessary. Following a fruitless meeting with one store owner, Sordyl informed mall managers of her intent to protest. Ten days after she issued an action alert, the store liquidated.

Sordyl’s powers of persuasion have helped The HSUS reach a new milestone. In January, more than 1,000 stores nationwide had signed its puppy-friendly pet store pledge; 90 of those signatures were gathered singlehandedly by Sordyl.

Michigan’s animal shelters, recognizing that cutting the puppy mill-pet store pipeline will boost adoptions and reduce euthanasia rates, have also embraced Sordyl’s efforts. The Michigan Pet Fund Alliance, a coalition of rescue groups and shelters working toward ending pet homelessness, features the Meetup prominently on its website and invited her to speak at its first Getting to the Goal conference last March.

As if phone-calling, letter-writing, and protesting weren’t time-consuming enough, Sordyl travels the state conducting lobbying workshops with HSUS Michigan state director Jill Fritz, preparing for the day when a puppy mill bill makes its way to the legislature floor. A bill introduced last November died in committee; budget cuts make it unlikely that it will reappear this term, says Sordyl, but she’s not discouraged. When that day does come, she’s ready to throw the considerable weight of her group behind it.
Is a Nonprofit/Government Merger Good for Your Community?

BY RICK JOHNSON

Humane organizations contracting for all or part of local government animal services is not a new concept, but one that has resulted in many successful collaborations over the years. However, the current economic slump has further hurt government budgets, and in some cases severely reduced city or county animal services. As the effects of these financial cuts “trickle down” into our communities, they can impact the animals we serve in many ways, including live release rates, field service operations, and adoptions.

Keeping in mind that our ultimate goal is to save lives, the effects of budget cuts can also provide new opportunities to work more effectively. Municipalities, in larger numbers, are looking at nonprofit animal welfare, care, and control organizations to provide some form of support, ranging from housing animals to a comprehensive contract for all animal services. The beauty of the nonprofit model is that it has fewer constraints: It enables you to keep bureaucracy to a minimum, take advantage of a motivated volunteer base, try a multitude of approaches to an issue, and make changes in a heartbeat.

Due to dramatic budget reductions in our community, local government animal service agencies were losing critical staff and no longer able to fully serve our community. Administrators of both the County of Sacramento and the City of Sacramento requested that the SPCA consider taking over the operations of the local animal service programs in hopes that the SPCA would be able to provide better care for the animals and better service to the community. As you look to either contract for the first time or increase government contracts in your community, here are some issues to consider.

The Sacramento SPCA recruited La Piana Consulting, through a grant awarded by the ASPCA (find out more at ASPCApro.org and click on “Grants”). La Piana has extensive experience with mergers and acquisitions of nonprofit agencies. We asked them for an independent analysis of the financial opportunities and risks of an acquisition by the SPCA of the County of Sacramento and the City of Sacramento animal shelters. (More than 45,000 animals annually enter our combined shelters.)

In the exploration stage, we wanted to find answers to many questions. Does supervising a government program fit into our mission? What might all the elements of this acquisition/merger look like? What is the financial viability of the long-term merger of housing, spay/neuter, adoption, licensing, etc.? Should we bid on housing, managing field services, or the whole program? What wealth of resources could we utilize? How would this merger be perceived in our community?

You must closely examine the government entity as a whole. After every election, you may end up reporting to an entirely different team than you negotiated with at the time of the contract. The team includes the local police department, city services, and the city council—each with their own ideas about how to best manage animal services. If your intake model is one that only receives relinquishments, your current animal population may have a higher adoption rate than a city or county shelter, but government animal control takes in stray animals with no history, which can present challenges on placement in your community. You may need to hire a dedicated employee to manage the government relationship, or create new job descriptions for several employees to manage the contract. Governments have limited resources; you must anticipate layoffs and further budget changes (in your contract as well).
From a board of directors’ perspective, consider whether expanding your contract or management of the operation is a good business decision. When you absorb a government program, rather than simply working together, there is economy of scale on adoptions, care for animals, and buying of products. There may be advantages to providing a consistent message to the community on events, adoptions, and spay/neuter, which could ultimately benefit the animals in your community, and increase your fundraising potential.

The change in culture and preparation for that change must be key to your decision. The new culture you create is a shared culture between a nonprofit organization with a variety of programs and services, and a government animal services agency with its own mandates and requirements … and there is no separating them. The collaboration will change the mindset of all employees. They may need to embrace a change in staffing levels, changes in promotions and career growth, and a new organizational chart.

The contract negotiation may include an option for the government to absorb shelter employees within other government service areas. In our feasibility study, we wanted to know if the employees were union or non-union; would hiring them impact the cost of running the program?

Take a look at the government facility. In our case, there is value in the physical structure, as Sacramento County Animal Care and Regulation is a new Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold shelter, meaning it’s a federally recognized green facility.

Think about how community perception can be impacted. There are many passionate animal supporters, volunteers, and advocates who will view this contract with expectations and concerns.

In the end, you must make a decision that is best for your community; helps you fulfill your mission; supports spay/neuter, humane education, and community awareness; and is financially sustainable. Saving animal lives remains our ultimate goal.

Rick Johnson is executive director of Sacramento SPCA and a board member of SAWA.

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Spay cadets. It might have been a scene from the TV show Scrubs. Vintage pop songs played in the background, while teams named Hello Kitty and Castration Sensation competed for titles like “most creative costume.” But the participants were all business, gathered together in Madison, Wis., to spay and neuter feral cats in honor of The Humane Society of the United States/Humane Society International 17th annual Spay Day. The Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association (HSVMA) and its student chapter helped fund and staff the Dane County Friends of Ferals clinic, a partnership that not only provided financial support for the clinic but also gave 45 veterinary and veterinary technician students the opportunity to observe and assist in surgeries. Eighty-six feral cats were sterilized there, while more than 100 were spayed and neutered in Corvallis, Ore., where HSVMA sponsored a clinic hosted by the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon and staffed by vet students from Oregon State University (OSU). The students who participated in the clinics were excited about being part of the live action. “We don’t touch animals in the first year,” says student Laura Niman, vice president of OSU’s HSVMA chapter. “So it’s nice to be able to get out and remind ourselves why we’re doing this.”

Calling a spayed a spayed. We just call it like we see it. And we see that this year’s Spay Day was a smashing success! A reported 55,455 spays and neuters were performed—including 7,544 internationally—at more than 650 events held in honor of Spay Day, an increase of 4 percent over last year’s operation (pun intended). Surgeries took place in all 50 states and 45 countries, with the result that kajillions (yes, that’s a scientific measurement) of unwanted puppies and kittens will not be born.

Pads on the iPad. Tired of playing mind games with your cat? Too lazy to wiggle the laser pointer for her? Here’s a simple solution: Shell out for an iPad! Several companies have developed apps that allow cats to put paws to iPad, and entertain themselves without any effort from you. Aptly-named apps with creative names like Cat Game, Cat Toy, App for Cats, and Game for Cats have felines chasing a dot, bug, mouse, frog, or other creature around the surface; some of the icons emit a sound when the cat “catches” it. Some cats go crazy for the games, writes Bob Tedeschi, tech reporter for the New York Times, but his own cat, Kukio, didn’t appear to be that intrigued. “She swatted the screen once, then watched (with great interest) the dots and mice dart across the screen until I got tired of watching her,” he writes at nytimes.com. If your kitty is just as happy with a fly or a ball of foil, maybe just put your money in the bank.
Clinical Immunology. In a small clinical trial with 88 patients, a single injection reduced the skin’s inflammatory reaction by 40 percent and elicited no serious side effects. Five to eight doses a year may be required initially, a small inconvenience for the ability to bury one’s face in cat fur.

The skinny on fat pets. The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention is sounding a warning about a disturbing trend. No, not the tendency to purchase matching pet-and-owner outfits, but that as more Americans become obese, so, too, do more of our pets. The association’s fourth annual National Pet Obesity Awareness Day Study, facilitated by the Banfield Pet Hospital chain, examined 133 adult cats and 383 adult dogs across the country and found that 53.4 percent of cats and 55.6 percent of dogs were overweight or obese. Based on these results, an estimated 50 million cats and 43 million dogs are packing too many pounds, most certainly due to too many treats and not enough exercise (sound familiar?). A 19-pound cat whose ideal weight is 10 pounds is analogous to a 5-foot-9-inch adult male weighing 321 pounds, while a 48-pound dog who should weigh 22 pounds is the same as a 5-foot-9-inch adult male weighing 368 pounds. As in humans, lugging around extra weight can have serious consequences for pets, contributing to arthritis and joint pain, diabetes, high blood pressure, and kidney disease. Comprehensive information on pet obesity and how to combat it is available at petobesityprevention.com.

LEEDing by example. Green is the favorite color at the Ozaukee campus of the Wisconsin Humane Society. The new shelter and veterinary clinic, which opened in March, has incorporated a number of eco-friendly and energy-saving features that are expected to earn the 22,000-square-foot facility a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) gold certification. Solar panels on the roof heat water for hand washing and bathing animals, while the roof itself reduces heat absorption. Rain barrels collect storm water runoff to irrigate the lawn and gardens designed with native plants. Many construction materials were manufactured locally, reducing carbon emissions associated with transportation. Reflecting the society’s origins as a humane education organization, the lobby holds an interactive exhibit that takes visitors on a scavenger hunt for green features throughout the building, as well as displays that teach about animals and the need to treat them, and each other, with kindness. The Ozaukee campus and its sister shelter in Milwaukee adopt out a combined total of nearly 10,000 pets a year and frequently take in animals transferred from overcrowded shelters in other states. Ozaukee opened its doors with 42 puppies from a shelter in Kentucky; by the end of the day, only two remained.

Coming right at-choo. Allergies are one of the top 10 reasons cats are surrendered to shelters. The severity of an allergy can vary, but those with serious reactions face a tough choice: deal with weekly allergy shots that may or not work and have side effects of their own, or give up a beloved companion. But hope springs eternal. Mark Larche and a team of researchers at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, have developed a vaccine that could change the lives of allergic owners and their cats. The researchers created a vaccine made of seven synthetic peptides modeled on an immune-stimulating protein secreted by cats. The synthetic peptides tell the immune cells that they’re harmless, no need to get nasty, according to the report published in Journal of Allergy & Clinical Immunology.