

6. Developing a Cruelty Response System (CRS)

Overview

A Cruelty Response System (CRS) is a collaboration between the county's primary humane agency (humane society, shelter, rescue or other agency), police, state's attorney, animal control officers, constables, humane investigators, state agriculture authorities, and local veterinarians. The overarching goal of the CRS is to promote the responsible care of animals and ensure that Vermont's animal welfare laws are enforced. The process serves to distribute responsibilities so that no single agency or individual is overburdened, to streamline the use of local resources in order to avoid the duplication of efforts, and most importantly, to ensure animals are afforded the protection they are due.

Objectives

- Leverage existing resources into a process that ensures that all complaints are investigated and handled in a timely and appropriate manner.
- Ensure that enforcement action is taken, including the rescue of animals in danger and the prosecution of offenders.
- Educate the general public as to what constitutes animal cruelty.
- Encourage the public to report suspected cruelty and neglect.
- Collect data for effective case tracking, documentation and reporting.

Process

The lead agency serves as the central clearinghouse for animal cruelty and neglect complaints, oversees the investigation process, coordinates resources, tracks the information, and follows up with the original witness. When the lead agency receives an animal cruelty complaint, a staff member will collect information about the animal(s) involved, the location, circumstances, and the contact information of the reporting party. Emergency calls pertaining to an animal in immediate danger are referred to the Vermont State Police. In non-emergency situations, the lead agency enters the information into a confidential online tracking database (Animal Tracks) and calls the designated humane investigator for the town in which the situation has occurred. This humane investigator is often the town's animal control officer, or may also be the constable, volunteer humane investigator, or local police department.

Sometimes lead agencies are able employ their own trained investigators to assist with cases. The investigator will then visit the property to assess the situation and speak with the animal owner who is the subject of the complaint. From here, a number of things can happen:

- If improvements need to be made in the care of the animal(s), the humane investigator will first try to rectify the situation by educating the pet owner about how to provide better care.
- If the situation does not improve, the humane investigator may contact the police for greater persuasion, or contact the lead agency for advice on how to proceed.
- If farm animals are involved and the investigator is unclear on the “accepted animal husbandry practices” in caring for a particular species, they should contact the Vermont Agency of Agriculture or ask the lead agency to do so.
- If the animal(s) appears to be in danger, the lead agency will work with the state’s attorney, humane investigator, police, and a local veterinarian to obtain and execute a search warrant.
- During the execution of a search warrant, a veterinarian will evaluate the condition of the animal(s) and make a recommendation as to whether or not the animal(s) should be removed from the situation. The police will then make the final decision as to seizure.
- If animals need to be seized, the lead agency provides foster care until legal forfeiture takes place, after which time, the animal(s) will be available for final disposition. While the lead agency cannot guarantee that shelter space will be available to care for seized animals, they can recruit foster homes for any species (including farm animals) from their membership base, working with the local media, or networking with other humane agencies throughout the state.

Case updates and resolutions are tracked in the online Cruelty Response System and outcomes are reported back to the original eyewitness.

Benefits

Animals

First and foremost, the animals benefit by ensuring they are afforded the protection of the law. Some animals are voluntarily surrendered during the investigation process, enabling them to find more appropriate homes. Some animals are seized when the situation is serious and a search warrant has been obtained. Many animals are helped because their owners are educated on how to better care for them. Thousands of animals state-wide will benefit from the successful implementation of cruelty response systems.

Police

A collaborative approach to enforcement saves the police time and money by having another agency or individual take a first look at animal-related complaints. This often filters the unsubstantiated complaints from the legitimate ones. When the police do not have to spend significant resources responding to non-urgent or unsubstantiated complaints, they are far more enthusiastic about providing assistance when their help is truly needed. Additionally, when the police do head out on animal-related calls they often appreciate the willingness of an experienced humane agent to accompany them to provide animal-related expertise.

Animal Control Officers

The animal control officers (ACO), constables, and other town humane investigators enjoy greater confidence in pursuing these cases when an effective CRS is in place. They know that they will be provided guidance and support and that the police and state's attorney will take action if necessary.

Local Humane Society or shelter

Maintaining a leadership role in this coalition serves to extend the capacity of the organization to benefit animals far beyond the confines of the physical shelter. An effective CRS enables the shelter to ensure that all complaints are investigated. Depending on how the CRS is established, the organization may incur no additional costs to put an effective system in place. Additionally, because animal cruelty cases can be so emotional, they give humane organizations another means of communicating with their local community and donor base. As the rule of thumb in animal welfare fundraising is "Do good things for animals and tell people about it," there is nothing quite like a successful end to an animal cruelty case to touch the hearts of major donors and inspire more substantial monetary gifts to the organization. The final and significantly important benefit is that this type of system fortifies relationships throughout the area, opening lines of communication, and fostering a sense of teamwork, professionalism, and mutual respect.

The Public

Ideally, the public will have one number to call to report animal cruelty resulting in less confusion and greater confidence that the complaint will be investigated. Members of the public are also pleased to receive a call back following the investigation to discuss how it was resolved. Following up with the original caller allows you to describe what was found, how the situation was handled, and why.

Agency of Agriculture

In the state of Vermont, investigators are required by law to notify the Agency of Agriculture prior to taking enforcement action in situations involving livestock. Representatives from the Agency of Agriculture are responsible for evaluating a situation to see if the care of the animals falls under the realm of “accepted agricultural practices.” While this agency receives many complaints about livestock directly, they are supportive of Cruelty Response Systems because they help filter complaints that do not need the Agency’s immediate attention.

State’s Attorney

A CRS benefits the state’s attorney by helping to build better cases that lead to successful prosecutions. Additionally, animal cruelty cases hold a high degree of public interest, and provide an opportunity to highlight some of their great work. Former Addison County State’s Attorney John Quinn said “The Addison County Anti-Cruelty Coalition has improved communication and made the prosecution of animal cruelty cases much more effective. This collaborative approach has improved the collection of evidence and put everyone on the same page with regard to what is needed to prosecute these cases. I strongly support the creation of Anti-Cruelty Coalitions!”

Lead Agency Contact List*

*For the most current listing of each lead agency and the towns they cover, go to
<http://www.vermonthumane.org/cruelty.php>

<p><u>Addison County</u> Homeward Bound Animal Welfare Center 802-388-1100</p>	<p><u>Lamoille County</u> North Country Animal League 802-888-5065</p>
<p><u>Bennington County</u> Second Chance Animal Center 802-681-5154</p>	<p><u>Orange County</u> Orange County Sheriff's Department 802-685-4875</p>
<p><u>Caledonia County</u> Caledonia County Sheriff's Department 802-748-6666</p>	<p><u>Orleans County</u> PETS of the Kingdom 802-673-3791</p>
<p><u>Chittenden County</u> Humane Society of Chittenden County 802-862-0135</p>	<p><u>Rutland County</u> Rutland County Humane Society 802-483-6700</p>
<p><u>Essex County</u> PETS of the Kingdom 802-673-3791</p>	<p><u>Washington County</u> Central Vermont Humane Society 802-476-3811</p>
<p><u>Franklin County</u> Franklin County Sheriff's Department 802-524-2121</p>	<p><u>Windham County</u> Windham County Humane Society (802) 254-2232</p>
<p><u>Grand Isle County</u> Humane Society of Chittenden County 802-862-0135</p>	<p><u>Windsor County</u> Lucy Mackenzie Humane Society 802-484-5829</p>