



ANIMAL CARE:

“HOPE FOR EVERY PAW”



In the latest installment of our Beyond the Desk series, we went behind the scenes at Genesee County **Animal Care**, where Chief Animal Care Officer Jay Parker and Deputy Director Danielle Macko shared insight into the department's daily operations, growing workload and the challenges of caring for thousands of animals each year. The department serves more than 4,000 animals each year with a staff of roughly 22 employees and an annual budget of \$2.6 million. Grants, nonprofit partnerships, volunteers, community donations and tax millage help support its work, funding needs such as medical equipment, spay and neuter services and heartworm treatment. From caring for stray and surrendered animals to coordinating adoptions, working with rescue organizations and providing resources to local residents, Animal Care's responsibilities extend far beyond what many people may realize when they visit or call animal control.

WHAT ARE WE INVOLVED WITH?

Pet Adoptions

License and Leash Law Enforcement

Cruelty and Neglect Complaint Investigations

Dog Licenses

Community Outreach Program

Inside Genesee County Animal Care, animals generally have several possible pathways for their future. The facility houses stray animals, owner surrenders and animals involved in court cases. Staff evaluate each animal before determining whether it should move toward adoption, foster care, transfer to another shelter or rescue organization. The **shelter adopts out more than 1,500 dogs and cats each year**, while many other animals are transferred to rescue groups and shelters throughout Michigan. A foster program provides another option for animals that may not thrive in a kennel, including young animals, elderly pets and animals with medical concerns.

One of the department's top priorities is preventing animals from entering the shelter in the first place. Officers may work with owners to locate lost pets or resolve issues before surrender becomes necessary. When staff encounter potential neglect, they often prioritize education over immediately assuming criminal intent. If an owner arrives to reclaim an animal that appears malnourished or medically neglected, staff may ask how long the animal was missing, whether it has preexisting medical conditions and what circumstances might explain its condition. In some cases, financial hardship rather than intentional neglect may be the underlying issue. Staff may work with the owner to find a solution or encourage a voluntary surrender so the animal can receive appropriate care and be placed in a new home. Overall, Animal Care aims to avoid an immediate confrontational approach, recognizing that many issues stem from a lack of knowledge about animal health, nutrition or veterinary care.



"What I love most about being the Volunteer Event Coordinator at Genesee County Animal Care is bringing people together for the animals. My job is about much more than schedules and events. It's about connecting volunteers with animals who need their time, attention, advocacy and love. There are definitely difficult days, but what keeps me going is seeing what happens when people come together. A volunteer takes a dog for a much-needed walk, spends time with a scared cat, helps at an adoption event or opens their home to foster, and suddenly that animal has another person in their corner. I hope to continue growing our volunteer community and helping more people see the difference they can make. Every person who walks through our doors to help becomes part of an animal's story and knowing I get to help make those connections happen is what makes me love what I do."

CHERI MARTIN, VOLUNTEER EVENT COORDINATOR



"If it is a prosecutable case, our veterinarian and officers step in and say, 'No, we're not sending this animal home'." When suspected **animal neglect** becomes a potential criminal case, the department works closely with law enforcement. Animal Care Officers can assess an animal's condition, provide treatment and assist with evidence collection and forensic needs. However, once a complaint becomes a criminal investigation, the appropriate law enforcement agency must take the lead.

One of the biggest misconceptions the department encounters involves what Animal Care Officers actually have the authority to enforce. Officers can enforce certain state laws, including those involving loose dogs and dog licensing, but local ordinances adopted by individual municipalities generally are outside their enforcement authority because the officers are not deputized by each municipality. That can leave residents unsure about whom to call. A complaint about a dog barking continuously may need to be handled by local police or code enforcement rather than Animal Care. The department was deputized roughly two decades ago and today a small team of roughly five or six officers covers about 640 square miles, making prioritization and cooperation with local agencies essential.

Medical care has become another major component of the department's operation. The shelter has a full-time veterinarian and veterinary support staff, along with equipment including an X-ray machine, dental equipment and ultrasound capabilities. Having veterinary care on site has changed how the department handles sick and injured animals because staff can now consult directly with a veterinarian rather than relying as heavily on outside clinics and making difficult treatment decisions without medical expertise. That can make a significant difference when an animal arrives needing expensive treatment, particularly because shelter resources are limited. The department also works with nonprofit partners and veterinary providers to reduce those costs. Heartworm-positive dogs are one example. Treatment that might cost roughly \$1,000 privately can be obtained through a shelter partnership for substantially less, with additional assistance from donations and fundraising. That support helps dogs with heartworm compete for adoption on a more equal footing with healthy dogs rather than remaining in the shelter indefinitely because prospective adopters cannot afford treatment.



While the department has expanded its emphasis on live outcomes, euthanasia remains one of the most difficult parts of the job. Staff members can become attached to animals they have cared for, while also helping members of the public through the loss of beloved pets. One of the hardest aspects is having to switch rapidly between emotionally intense situations and routine shelter responsibilities. An employee may comfort an owner who has just lost a pet and then immediately return to cleaning kennels, answering phones or caring for another animal. That emotional burden has prompted the department to place greater emphasis on compassion fatigue and employee support. Staff members have completed specialized training through the Bissell Pet Foundation and use what they learned to recognize signs of stress among employees and volunteers. Responsibilities are rotated when possible so that one person is not repeatedly handling the most difficult cases. Staff acknowledge that it is especially difficult when an animal they have personally cared for must be euthanized because of serious medical or behavioral issues. Despite these challenges, the shelter has maintained a save rate above 90% and has been **recognized by Best Friends Animal Society as a no-kill shelter.**



Another major program focuses on feral cats. Through the trap-neuter-return program, community members trap feral cats and bring them to scheduled clinics, where the cats are sterilized before being returned to their colonies. The program operates from roughly March through early November and has sterilized more than 1,000 cats. Rather than euthanizing feral cats, the department uses sterilization to gradually reduce the population while relying on community members who monitor established colonies. Because demand already fills available appointments, the program is largely sustained through word of mouth rather than broad advertising.

The Animal Care network has been strengthened by a growing volunteer program that now includes dog walkers, cat volunteers, laundry and dish teams, transportation volunteers and social media helpers. Staff said many of those programs did not exist when they first began working at the shelter and the growth has allowed employees to concentrate on their specific responsibilities while volunteers help fill critical gaps. The department also hosts adoption events and occasionally participates in larger community events, although officials said they are selective about traveling with shelter animals because of safety and liability concerns.

Community outreach also includes a pet-food program that distributed more than 25,000 pounds of food last year, much of it obtained through food-bank partnerships and donations. The department also holds two or three vaccination clinics each year, often through grants and partnerships. One recent clinic served 428 animals, allowing residents to access vaccinations at a lower cost.

"I am an Animal Care Specialist and one of the things I love most about my job is being around the people I work with. We all work together, support each other and rely on one another every day. There are definitely difficult and frustrating days, but knowing that every member of our team has my back helps keep me going. We all understand how hard this job can be and we are always there to support each other when we need it. One of the most rewarding parts of being an ACS is being able to save an animal and help find them a new home. Knowing that we can make a difference in an animal's life makes all the hard work worth it. My hope for the future is that we can get as many animals adopted as possible and continue giving them the second chances they deserve. I am proud to be an Animal Care Specialist because of the work we do and the people I get to do it with. Everyone works incredibly hard and we depend on each other every day. At the end of the day, we aren't just coworkers. We are a family and I think that is what makes Animal Care so special."

MICHAEL PRINCE, ANIMAL CARE SPECIALIST

The shift from traditional animal control to a broader animal care model is reflected in the department's emphasis on animal welfare, education, community partnerships and keeping animals out of shelters whenever possible. Staff increasingly volunteer beyond their regular duties, foster animals, participate in adoption events and organize fundraisers, demonstrating their commitment to the mission. Still, staffing, funding, veterinary resources and rising shelter intake remain challenges. The department is exploring expanded veterinary services, including a potential mobile spay-and-neuter operation serving Genesee County. In the meantime, employees, volunteers, foster families, veterinarians and community partners help fill the gaps. The goal extends beyond animal control to keeping animals healthy, helping them remain with their owners when possible and finding new homes when necessary. "It really is a community problem. We can do our part, but at the end of the day, the more we educate, the more we get that support, the better off not only the shelter will be, but all of our partner municipality shelters as well."



"I am very passionate about animal rescue and my role here has been incredibly rewarding. Being able to make a difference in the lives of animals every day means the world to me. I love being able to see the journey from start to finish for the those that come into our care. It's an honor to be a part of their story and to provide the comfort, love and care that they are so deserving of. The resilience of these animals is truly inspiring. We experience our fair share of emotional turmoil, frustration and heartbreak but seeing the animals get their second chance at a happy life makes it all worth it. The happy updates give us something positive to focus on when we have particularly challenging days."

HANNAH PETERSON, SOCIAL MEDIA SPECIALIST

"The animals are obviously a huge part of what keeps me going, but so are the people I work beside. Shelter work truly takes a village. I am incredibly proud of the compassion, humor, resilience and heart I see from my coworkers every day. We laugh together, cry together, celebrate the wins, carry each other through the losses and occasionally ask ourselves how this is a real job. For the future of Animal Care, I hope we continue growing beyond what people traditionally think of when they hear "Animal Control." I want our community to see a department focused not only on enforcement, but also on animal welfare, education, prevention, resources, responsible pet ownership and keeping animals with the people who love them whenever possible. I also hope we keep pushing for change beyond the walls of our shelter. Michigan's dog laws were originally enacted more than a century ago (in 1919), and animal welfare has changed tremendously since then. If we want to create lasting change, our laws and systems have to continue changing with it. Shelters everywhere are overwhelmed and we cannot adopt our way out of every problem. Animal welfare isn't something a shelter can fix by itself. It takes responsible pet ownership, accessible veterinary care, spay and neuter resources, licensing and identification, education, prevention, stronger laws and a community willing to be part of the solution. We need our community to advocate with us, support the resources that keep pets in their homes, adopt and foster when they're able, volunteer, educate others and speak up for meaningful changes to Michigan's animal laws. The shelter should be a safety net for our community, but for that safety net to work, we need people standing on both sides of it. Most of all, I want people to know how much heart goes into this work. The public may only see one interaction, phone call, Facebook post or animal, but behind the scenes there are people working incredibly hard every day because we genuinely care about the animals and the community we serve. It isn't always easy work, but I'm incredibly proud that it's mine."

MEAGAN BREWER, ANIMAL CARE SPECIALIST

"Growing up, I was told the cliché, "If you work a job you love, you'll never work a day in your life." I never understood until I started working with animals. I started volunteering at GCAC in 2023. I would spend my lunch breaks and weekends walking dogs and on off days, my husband and I would cut up hot dogs for enrichment. I fostered two dogs through GCAC and failed at fostering one of them, as she ended up being the perfect addition to our family (who happens to be our cover model, Pierogi!). I also worked at a doggy daycare, where I learned so much and became even more passionate about understanding behavior, body language and needs. I was lucky enough to get the opportunity to work at GCAC and that's when I found what I had been missing. This has never really felt like a job to me. Shelter work is something I can't imagine not doing. I love this work because it makes me feel good to know that I am doing something that matters. That doesn't mean it's always easy. Some of the things we witness and carry with us are incredibly difficult. There are days when the emotional weight of this job catches up with you. One of the most special things about our team is that we understand. We can be each other's shoulder to cry on or can recognize when someone needs to stay to themselves. We always come back together with the understanding that we are all riding the same emotional roller coaster. We know that sometimes the weight of this work gets the best of us and a bad day might come out as frustration toward someone else. We don't take those moments personally because we understand where they are coming from. We give each other grace and move forward together because we know how much this work asks of us. We are bonded by something that is difficult to explain to people outside of shelter work. We all have huge hearts for the animals that come through our doors."

KRYSTAL FORSYTH, ANIMAL CARE SPECIALIST