

More Pets Are Getting Deserted In New Milford; Economy Cited

By ELIZABETH MAKER

NEW MILFORD—Renee Gardner arrived at work one bitter cold morning last week to find a chewed-off rope tied to the door handle of the Animal Welfare Society.

Someone, she recounted, had tied a dog to the door, apparently hoping that the shelter would care for it. "This kind of thing is happening more and more," commented Ms. Gardner, manager of the nonprofit society. "Times are hard for everyone, and pets are often getting the worst of it."

Though Ms. Gardner called the local canine control office in New Milford to alert them that the dog was likely "on the loose with half a rope around his neck," it had not been located as of this week. "He could have been strangled by it," Ms. Gardner said, adding that instead, she hoped someone found the dog and is caring for it.

Officials say that while the threat of rabies has pet owners keeping a tighter leash on their dogs and cats, cutting down on the number of roaming—and

consequently impounded—pets, the problem of homeless or abandoned animals in New Milford and statewide is on the rise, apparently due to the flagging economy.

Since the Animal Welfare Society opened on Dodd Road in July, "We have been swamped" with pets dropped off on the facility's doorstep, as well as with calls from pet owners who either cannot afford to care for their animals or who are being forced to move and cannot take their pets with them, Ms. Gardner said.

Scenario Is Repeated

The scenario is repeated throughout Connecticut, according to Richard Johnston, president of the Connecticut Humane Society. "We've seen a definite increase in the number of people surrendering their pets for economic reasons," Mr. Johnston said Tuesday. He said the state Humane Society's five branches take in about 25,000 dogs and cats each year, but that over the past year, the number has risen by about 5 percent.

Just before Christmas, Mr. Johnston related, "Someone left a box of eight Labrador pups on our doorstep," at the society's Newington headquarters. And over the past two weeks, "We've had three cases where animals were just abandoned on our property. You can tell the animals are waiting for their owners to return because they just stand there and look at each car that goes by. It's very sad."

Mr. Johnston said the society takes such animals in, provides immediate veterinary care and "We get them to the point where they're healthy and vigorous and then we place them." But, not every dog and cat can be placed, and those animals must be euthanized, he said. Which animals are euthanized, and after how long, depends on a number of factors, including the animal's health,

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Mr. Johnston explained.

Sandra Tryon, a representative from the Humane Society of the United States, said this week that the problem of homeless pets across the country "seems to be increasing," but she did not have statistics available for the past year. In an average year, however, more than 12 million dogs, cats, puppies and kittens are left at animal shelters around the country, she said, and usually about eight million of those must be euthanized because there are not enough homes for them all.

New Milford's Animal Welfare Society does not euthanize animals, Ms.

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Gardner said. Instead, "We keep fighting to find homes for them," by featuring the animals' photographs in local newspapers and throughout area stores and veterinarians' offices. The society takes in stray cats that have been found by residents, but dogs must come directly from the region's canine control offices in New Milford and in New Fairfield, she explained.

When a dog is picked up by canine control officers, its owner is called right away, provided that the dog is licensed. If the dog is not licensed, and its owner cannot be located, the dog remains at the pound for a week, and a one-day ad is placed in an area newspaper. If no one claims the dogs, they are usually purchased by the Animal Welfare Society, for \$5 apiece, said Ms. Gardner. Society workers take the dogs to a veterinarian for necessary medical treatments and vaccination shots. They keep them at the society's facility until "someone comes and offers them a home," said Ms. Gardner.

The society asks a donation of \$55 for

each dog, "just to cover the cost of the medical attention they all have to get," said Ms. Gardner. "We get some of the most wonderful dogs. It baffles me sometimes that no one claims them," she added.

As Ms. Gardner outlined her concerns during a recent interview, Scarlett, a thin Doberman pinscher-German shepherd cross, wagged her tail fervently and licked eagerly between her cage bars at the onlookers admiring her puppies.

Scarlett, she said, is just one example of a dog someone probably could not afford to keep. One morning last month, she turned up on a woman's lawn off Route 202 in New Milford and began giving birth to the puppies.

"It was freezing cold, so the woman brought her inside," related Audrey McKay, one of the three canine control officers working for New Milford, Bridgewater, Roxbury, Sherman, New Fairfield and Brookfield. The woman left the dog in her kitchen, "but the dog broke out into the living room and had the rest of the puppies on her couch," said Ms. McKay.

Canine control officers picked Scarlett and her puppies up from the woman's home and they eventually reached the society shelter. Ms. Gardner said that, considering Scarlett was so malnourished, it was amazing she was able to give birth. Of Scarlett's 10 puppies, the society has placed six so far.

Ms. Gardner then introduced Frosty, a big orange tabby cat that was left on the facility's doorstep in November, also on a cold morning, hence the name Frosty. Knowing that his chances of being adopted were slim because of his "senior citizen" status and his many health problems, "We've pretty much figured he's here for the duration," Ms. Gardner said, as Frosty roamed freely throughout the office.

This week, according to Ms. Gardner, there were nine adult dogs and 14 puppies in the shelter. Ten of those puppies were born in the shelter after their mother, a black Labrador mix, was found wandering along Railroad Street by a canine control officer. The officer took the dog to the pound, and after no one responded to an advertisement that she had been found, she was brought to



Briscoe and Marilyn Lang get to know Zelda, an orphan they are planning to adopt from the New Milford Animal Welfare Society.

Jenine Michaud

the society shelter. The puppies, which are likely part Rotweiler, will be ready for placing in about two weeks.

Ms. Gardner went on to introduce other shelter residents—Peggy, an eager, friendly Chihuahua, and Freckles, a cocker spaniel with dark eyes. She explained the plight of Matt, a German shepherd who "was thrown out of a boat on Candlewood Lake last summer. Someone saw it happen, and they went over and got him and brought him to canine control."

The society is a private, nonprofit group funded solely by donations, Ms. Gardner pointed out. Its facility was built in June, with \$400,000 left by the late Ruth Young of Bridgewater.

"A lot of people think the state or the town pays for this operation," she said. "They call us in the middle of the night and say, 'come get this cat—we're paying your salaries.' They don't realize that's just not true."

As of last month, the regional canine

control authority administered by the six towns rather than the state. The state had funded the region's care of stray and diseased dogs for 20 years before it informed the area's three canine control officers in September that they were being laid off. Leaders from towns in the region scrambled to hire and pay the workers so the region's canine problems would not go unattended.

Then, last month, the state notified the workers that, because of union concessions won by Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr., the three employees would be rehired by the state. The state did not, however, offer to reinstate them; their new jobs are yet to be determined, according to the officers.

Town officials, led by First Selectman William Stuart of Bridgewater, agreed to take over administration of the program, with each of the six towns funding it. According to a contract drawn up by attorney Fred Baker of New Milford, the town with the highest population, New Milford, will pay the highest per-

centage of the program. The total yearly cost of the program is expected to run between \$140,000 and \$150,000, Mr. Stuart said. The state's cost for the program last year was \$136,000, he added.

The New Milford Town Council approved the contract, saying the towns are likely better off administering the program, since "the state is so shaky these days," according to Mayor Liba Furhman. Since the six towns reimbursed the state for the cost of the program anyway, the town should have no problem handling its cost, she said.

The regional authority has already ordered three new vans for the canine officers, which will be leased at a total annual cost of \$16,000, according to Mr. Stuart.

"I think it's going to be great working with the towns," said Ms. McKay. "I think they're a lot more stable than the state is."

And, though Ms. McKay says the canine control officers are looking forward to the new arrangement, she adds

that they will have their hands full dealing with stray dogs, and other problems.

Owners of roaming dogs are given a warning on their first offense, but the second violation brings a \$60 fine, Ms. McKay said.

Ms. McKay said the number of dogs impounded in the six-town region from July 1990 to June 1991 was 526, a decrease from the same period the previous year, when 665 dogs were impounded. And statewide, the number of impounded dogs has steadily declined from 1981, when 32,000 dogs were taken in by canine control officers through 1990, when 22,000 dogs were impounded, according to Frank Intino, director of state Department of Agriculture's canine control office.

Mr. Intino attributes the decline over the past year "definitely to the rabies scare." He said that ever since the first rabies case was reported in Ridgefield last April, "It's like someone shut the door on all the roaming animals."