

Euthanasia debate: Protesters plan to challenge commissioners

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ABSTRACT

Animal welfare organizations and advocates are rallying people to attend a peaceful protest outside the Historic Courthouse Monday to urge Randolph County commissioners to stop the practice of using carbon monoxide gas to euthanize animals at the county animal shelter. The rally is timed to coincide with the monthly county commissioners' meeting that begins at 6 p.m. Some people are expected to speak during the public comment period that begins at 6 p.m. The grant The rally was spurred by a disagreement between Randolph County officials and the Humane Society of the United States.

FULL TEXT

Feb. 01—"There is a stigma when the shelter uses gas. People think of it as a sad place. They think of it as 'the pound' where animals go to die. We want to help shelters so they can be seen as a place where people will want to come and volunteer, to partner with the shelter. We think animal shelter can be seen as the cornerstone of animal welfare."

— Kimberley Alboum, N.C. state director for The Humane Society of the United States

ASHEBORO – Animal welfare organizations and advocates are rallying people to attend a peaceful protest outside the Historic Courthouse Monday to urge Randolph County commissioners to stop the practice of using carbon monoxide gas to euthanize animals at the county animal shelter.

The rally will run from 4-7 p.m., according to information from advocates. The rally is timed to coincide with the monthly county commissioners' meeting that begins at 6 p.m. Some people are expected to speak during the public comment period that begins at 6 p.m.

The grant

The rally was spurred by a disagreement between Randolph County officials and the Humane Society of the United States. In January, the Randolph County Animal Shelter, which is operated by the county health department, agreed to return a \$3,000 grant received from the Humane Society in December 2011 over disagreements concerning the use of the grant.

Kimberley Alboum, N.C. state director for The Humane Society of the United States, said in an interview Friday there was no written agreement between the society and the shelter concerning the use of the grant. She said, in communications with MiMi Cooper, public health director, discussions were held in 2011 about using the money to remove the gas chambers at the shelter.

Albourn maintains Cooper said the gas chambers were cemented in place and could not easily be removed. Albourn said Cooper told her the chambers could be disabled by removing a specific piece of equipment. Albourn said Cooper told her the grant would be used to remodel the front entrance to the shelter.

However, Albourn said, she believed at the end of those discussions that Cooper would disable the chambers. She said the Humane Society has given similar grants to nine counties in North Carolina, not including Randolph County. She said there has never been any misunderstanding as to why these grants were being awarded.

Cooper said she made it clear to Albourn how the grant would be used. She said she never made a commitment to stop the use of carbon monoxide gas for euthanasia. Cooper said the use of carbon monoxide gas is an approved method of euthanasia when administered as recommended by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). She said she believes it is a humane and quick method of death.

EBI vs gas

The issue of euthanasia by injection (EBI) versus carbon monoxide gas has become the point of contention between two camps. Both camps cite information from AVMA. Both sides believe they have the moral high ground.

In 2013, the AVMA issued an updated version of its "Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals."

In this publication, both methods are discussed. AVMA does not take a stand on the matter in the guide but did issue a letter in February 2013 clarifying its position.

In the guideline, carbon monoxide is described as an acceptable procedure for euthanasia provided a number of contingencies are met. The contingencies include proper training for technicians who administer the gas; sound construction of the facility; location in a well-ventilated area; and the use of a 6 percent concentration of gas.

AVMA experts said, properly administered, animals euthanized by this method experience "loss of consciousness without pain and with minimal discernible discomfort" and "death occurs rapidly."

The guide also states, "When appropriately administered, acceptable injectable euthanasia agents result in smooth loss of consciousness prior to cessation of cardiac and/or respiratory function, minimizing pain and distress to the animal."

In the letter of clarification issued on Feb. 26, 2013, the AVMA stated: "In the 2013 Guidelines, euthanasia by intravenous injection of an approved euthanasia agent remains the preferred method for euthanasia of dogs, cats, and other small companion animals. Gas chambers are not recommended for routine euthanasia of cats and dogs in shelters and animal control operations. The guidelines state that 'alternate methods with fewer conditions and disadvantages are recommended for companion animals where feasible.'"

In her call to rally, advocate Angela Wade-Allred cited information on the dangers to staffers using carbon monoxide gas at shelters. She reported in 2009, a shelter worker was put in the emergency room when a gas build-up caused the door of the Lincoln County shelter to explode open. In 2008, an explosion occurred in a gas chamber at Iredell County, she reported.

However, lethal injection poses problems to staffers as well. The AVMA manual reports, "Heightened awareness for personnel safety is imperative when using injectable euthanasia agents because needle-stick injuries involving

these drugs have been shown to result in adverse effects (41.6 percent of the time); 17 percent of these adverse effects were systemic and severe."

Richard Wells, Randolph County manager, said he is aware of one incident at the county animal shelter when two shelter technicians were seriously injured while trying to euthanize an animal by lethal injection. The animal became difficult to control. The syringe broke and deadly chemicals were thrown into the technicians' faces.

Cooper said, in her experience, there is a risk to every method used. She said, in her mind, it should be about what is best for the animal. The county uses both methods, she said. It depends on the circumstances with each animal.

Albourn said, while she firmly believes EBI is the best method to use, some animal advocates go too far. They are using old pictures and videos that expose methods that are no longer in use. Such tactics do little to further the cause of animal welfare, she said.

What it really comes down to, Albourn said, is companion animals deserve to know the touch of a human as they take their last breathe. They should not be stuck in a dark, cold box as gas is pumped inside. They should be held and comforted, she said.

The Johnston County connection

At the same time that Randolph County received its grant, Johnston County received a \$3,000 grant from the Humane Society. Johnston County Animal Shelter administrator, Ernie Wilkinson, said the county was already in the process of dismantling its gas chamber. He said Johnston County used the money to help pay for the construction of internal shelter improvements for the change-out.

"Basically, we used it to build a euthanasia room," he said.

The change-over took time. Wilkinson said work was completed and the county stopped using a gas chamber in January 2013. In 2012, Johnston County's shelter took in 3,123 cats and 2,448 dogs. In the same year, Randolph County took in 3,483 cats and 3,222 dogs. Johnston County euthanized 2,919 cats and 1,542 dogs that year. In Randolph County, the numbers were 3,039 cats euthanized and 2,356 dogs.

Wilkerson said the change in Johnston County was driven by its citizenry. The change had nothing to do with grants from the Humane Society. Wilkerson said he and his staff were prepared for the change. He said he saw a change in the attitude of county citizens and had his staff trained by 2009 to make the transition. He believes, eventually, whether by law or social pressure, all county shelters will make the change.

In Johnston County, any animal that must be euthanized is first sedated. It then receives an intravenous injection designed to kill. Two technicians are required to complete the process. Wilkinson estimates each operation takes roughly 15 minutes.

Some animal advocates argue the cost to operate a shelter that uses EBI is no more than the cost to use gas. The American Humane Association states on its website: "If done according to AVMA standards, the costs to use a CO chamber are comparable to the costs for using EBI."

Wilkerson said in an interview on Friday, that is not true. He did not have exact figures for Johnston County's first year of operation using EBI. However, he estimates the costs have increased beyond 50 percent.

And, he said, at the end of the day, all shelters whether they use injection or gas are killing thousands of animals each year.

The real problem

The problem is not money. Randolph County Manager Richard Wells pointed out, there is never enough money to address all the needs of a county's citizens. He hopes, if a regional landfill contract is approved, the county will get \$750,000 to be used to help construct a new, modern shelter. He estimated the cost to build the shelter at around \$3 million. There is no guarantee the new shelter would not use carbon monoxide gas to euthanize animals.

According to records at the N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services Animal Welfare Section, Randolph County spent \$395,718 to operate its shelter in 2012. That year, 5,395 dogs and cats were put to sleep.

In the same year, Wake County budgeted \$2.4 million for a shelter where 6,935 dogs and cats were killed. Guilford County operated its shelter with \$1.5 million in 2012 and killed 7,323 dogs and cats. Charlotte/Mecklenburg spent \$4.6 million and had to kill 9,075 dogs and cats.

If there is one thing that everyone in this debate can agree on, it's that the method of death is not the problem. The problem is animal overpopulation.

Wells said it is frustrating to deal with some people who blame county employees for killing abandoned animals. Unlike a private shelter, the county cannot refuse to accept an animal regardless of its temperament or physical condition. Many of the animals the county receives could be good pets, if someone would adopt them. But many are sick, old, poorly socialized or simply too wild to make a domestic pet. The county has little recourse and people should not demonize the dedicated, caring staff members who are just doing their jobs. People should blame irresponsible pet owners who don't properly care for their animals, he said.

Wilkinson said in Johnston County, officials have made a concerted effort to support spay/neuter programs. He said the mobile spay/neuter clinic comes to the Johnston County Animal Shelter twice each month to offer low-cost clinics. He estimates the clinic brings in 150-160 animals each month. He didn't have exact figures but said he can report animal population at the shelter is down for 2013. He believes no government can ultimately get a handle on the problem through euthanasia programs. They have to be proactive in stopping pet overbreeding.

Even the Humane Society's Albourn said she is frustrated, going round and round on this debate of how to kill companion animals. She would rather spend her time promoting spay/neuter programs. She would prefer to spend the society's money on educational programs for pet owners, she said.

She sees some progress. In 2012, 44.6 percent of the dogs and 71.75 percent of the cats brought into U.S. shelters were killed. But that is better than the 51.73 percent of dogs and 78.42 percent of cats that were killed at shelters nationwide in 2010, she said.

Albourn said she is disappointed with the outcome in Randolph County. She said she will not be at the protest rally on Monday. She said she believes people have a right to protest, but she isn't sure protests accomplish much.

She said she supports the people who work in animal shelters. The reason to encourage shelter to move away from what she called "the barbaric practice" of euthanizing with gas is to improve the public's perception of its

county animal shelter.

"There is a stigma when the shelter uses gas. People think of it as a sad place. They think of it as 'the pound' where animals go to die," she said. "We want to help shelters so they can be seen as a place where people will want to come and volunteer, to partner with the shelter. We think animal shelter can be seen as the cornerstone of animal welfare."

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