

To the rescue?

by Amanda Millard

Tears well up in Joann Hager's eyes as she talks about seeing animals euthanized via gas at a local animal control organization.

"I will never forget the screams coming from that cinder block structure," Hager said. "I had nightmares for two weeks."

The next week Hager loaded up her pickup truck with 28 dogs. That's how Tri-County Animal Rescue began in 1998, she said.

In 2000, Hager said she registered Tri-County Animal Rescue with the Department of Agriculture as an animal shelter.

In 2005, Tri-County Animal Rescue adopted out about 1,200 dogs and cats. The group of about 20 volunteers sets up adoption events most Saturdays at area PetSmarts, including the one on Franklin Boulevard.

On Tuesday, about 200 dogs and cats were on site at the rescue located on the Lincoln County side of Alexis.

Each year, the organization passed state inspections.

Until this year.

In January, Tri-County Animal Rescue failed its state inspection. An inspector listed excessive hair accumulation in walkways, more than four dogs in a kennel, and wooden door trim and resting boards in the cat area, according to an animal welfare inspection report.

Hager said that the enclosures had just been washed out and she was waiting for walkways to dry before raking away the hair. The pens with more than four dogs were her own personal animals, she said, and shouldn't be subject to shelter rules.

"If somebody's there in the middle of cleaning, we're going to have hair in the walkways," Hager said. "We had to replace all our wooden dog houses with plastic dog houses."

When inspectors came back for a follow-up inspection in June, Hager turned over her registration.

"I voluntarily gave that up," Hager said. "I just don't want to go through all the hassle."

Veterinary medical officer David Waldrep with the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services said the state agency would work with groups that are not up to code as long as progress is being made.

"There's usually a money issue," Waldrep said. "We're extremely lenient and work right along with folks to bring it up to compliance."

Tri-County Animal Rescue can continue to operate as it has in the past without a license, Waldrep said.



“She could take in dogs and cats but not take money for them,” Waldrep said.

However, Tri-County Animal Rescue can still recoup some medical costs from those who adopt. Before adoption, Tri-County has the animals spayed and neutered.

Other no-kill shelters in North Carolina have faced failing inspections, which fall under pass or failure.

“I don’t need the state of North Carolina to tell me how to take care of my animals,” Hager said. “Rescue groups are doing a favor to the community.”

Friends for Life at the Haven animal shelter is one of the state’s largest no-kill shelters and houses around 1,000 animals. The eastern North Carolina group also has failed an inspection.

“It’s illegal for an animal to walk in grass in a shelter,” said Linden Spear, director of the Haven. “For an animal that has been abandoned, we have to make a quality environment.”

That means open spaces and human contact, Spear said. But regulations mean when the Haven remodels, it will have to build smaller kennels to be able to afford concrete. She spent \$25,000 on gravel because her kennels were on grass. It will cost \$500,000 to remodel.

“They’re asking us to be held to a higher standard than a veterinary hospital,” Spear said.

Legislation makes it difficult for new no-kill shelters to start up because they have to comply with all the regulations from the beginning.

“The future of the no-kill movement in North Carolina has ended,” Spear said. “This is called animal welfare, but it’s not.”

Tri-County Animal Rescue takes in many animals from Gaston County Animal Control, said administrator Reggie Horton.

Public shelters were added to the list of places required to have annual inspections last year, Horton said. Gaston County Animal Control received a preliminary inspection with the only concern being food still in bags placed in plastic containers. Inspectors wanted the food dumped out of the bags and lids on the plastic containers.

Horton said having a set of standards benefits animals.

“We simply can’t do anything below humane and proper treatment from a caring and trained staff who know what they’re doing,” Horton said. “We’re all working for the common good.”

Still, people with private rescues and shelters say that they can’t afford to maintain the same conditions as a facility that receives tax dollars.

“We’re being judged as a Hilton when we’re a homeless facility,” Hager said. “It doesn’t seem right or fair.”

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