

Oconee Shelter Putting Fewer Animals to Death

By Ray Chandler
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The numbers tell the story, according to Oconee County officials: More stray animals that wind up in the county's clutches are finding homes. Fewer are being put to death. By the latest numbers, a dog or cat that finds itself in the county animal shelter is more than twice as likely to be adopted as in the past and there is only about a one in five chance of it having to be euthanized, according to Capt. Mike Crenshaw of the Oconee County Sheriff's Office. "We have never recorded above 30 percent in adoptions for one month since the sheriff's office took control of the unit in 2005," Crenshaw said.

In March, Crenshaw said, the adoption rate hit 54 percent. So far in 2010, for the quarter ending in March, the shelter took in 1,657 animals, of which only 342 have had to be euthanized, for a rate of about 21 percent, according to Crenshaw. "We want to continue to save as many animals as possible," he said. In years past, the euthanasia rate for the Oconee County animal shelter has reached as high as 90 percent. For 2009, it was about 45 percent.

The animals are saved through a combination of adoptions, transfers to animal rescue programs and owners simply reclaiming lost pets, according to Crenshaw, but significant credit also goes to two programs. The first promotes adoptions and the second seeks to reduce the population of stray animals. Both programs are funded by donations. Operation Save A Pet gives away six free pets on Wednesdays beginning at 10 a.m. Donations cover the normal charges of \$75 for a dog and \$65 for a cat. The animals are spayed or neutered and given all necessary tests and inoculations.

The second program has provided free spaying or neutering for the pets of county residents with incomes less than \$10,000 per year. Donations to that program, according to Crenshaw, have increased such that now the program's income threshold can be raised. The new limit, Crenshaw said, will be \$15,000 per year.

Besides the effects of these two programs, **the reversal of the past trend of euthanasia** that led one former county administrator to label the animal shelter a death camp has been aided by two major changes from the past, according to Crenshaw. One is a new animal shelter off U.S. 123 between Seneca and Westminster that is more accessible than the one it replaced. That one, off Coffee Road above Walhalla, was originally a dairy barn. The second **is the county's partnering with the Oconee County Humane Society. Crenshaw said both county animal control officers and humane society volunteers deserve credit for the changes that are seeing fewer animals having to die.** "Their love of animals is evident and each day begins with the mindset to educate folks to be responsible pet owners," Crenshaw said.