

Sunday Column – The Future of Animal Welfare

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Last week I attended the second annual Georgia Companion Animal Partnership Conference. We are fortunate in Georgia to have two active statewide coalitions. GCAP's primary function is to present the conference. The Georgia Coalition of Hope for Cats and Dogs is dedicated toward identifying regions with high kill rates and connecting them with the support they need to make Georgia a "no-kill" state.

This one day conference would appeal to anyone working in the field of animal welfare, even outside of Georgia. The sixteen workshops covered everything from legislative advocacy to the hands-on operational aspects of an animal shelter. I never leave a conference without learning something new and this was no exception.

One of the best things about a conference like this is exposure to new perspectives. I think it is our passion coupled with the life and death nature of the work that causes us to cling so desperately to rigid ideas about how things should be done. I once heard Dr. Julie Levy, a shelter medicine expert from the University of Florida, give a retrospective of her career which she began as an animal control officer. Looking back, she described how old ideas, which seemed so vital to saving lives, were later revealed to result in the death of the very animals they were trying to protect.

Our keynote speaker at the GCAP conference this year was Roger Haston, Ph.D., Chief Administrative Officer of PetSmart Charities. His improbable route into animal welfare began when he earned a doctorate in geophysics from the University of California Santa Barbara and a MBA in finance from Rice University.

After working in the oil industry for a number of years he moved to Colorado, a state known for large and progressive animal welfare organizations. Dr. Haston became involved with the Humane Society of Boulder Valley as a volunteer, board member and finally, board chair. In 2012, he committed himself full time to animal welfare and took over as Executive Director at the Animal Assistance Foundation. There he merged his passion for science, business, and people to help the animals of Colorado and beyond. He has recently joined PetSmart Charities as the CAO and serves on several national level boards.

Dr. Haston's core message was that we must be grounded in reality if we're going to succeed. Today, the population of adoptable animals is on the decline with animals that are harder to place making up a greater proportion of the whole. Of course, he was talking about those blocky-headed dogs known as "pit bulls."

According to a study done by Mississippi State University, transports moved over 778,000 dogs from southern states to the north. PetSmart has long been a leader in the area of animal transport. Unfortunately, what has developed over time is that the same dogs that go for \$25 - \$75 in the south sell for as much as \$400 in the north. Dr. Haston claimed this phenomenon is attracting some bad actors and we have good reason to be wary.

He spoke of the Pets for Life movement and how essential these programs are to curing the root causes of pet overpopulation, animal cruelty and neglect. Even while praising PFL he made a plausible case for why "free" spay/neuter is still too expensive for our target clients. We have to recognize the hardships those who live in poverty face just to take their pet to a free spay/neuter appointment. Our PFL clients

often lack reliable transportation. Taking a few hours off work to bring their pet to an appointment has a meaningful effect on their pocketbook and can even result in job loss. The reality is that we have to go to extraordinary lengths to make these programs successful.

Dr. Haston's dire message is a wake-up call. We should beware of falling into a state of self-congratulation over the programs we have implemented without looking closely at how effective they actually are. Low cost spay/neuter programs are changing the face of our work in animal welfare. But they will only work if we are reaching the population in need of these services.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.