



Disinfectant, Licenses, and New Beginnings...

It's All Part of a Day in the Life of the Laguna Beach Animal Shelter

7:50 a.m. On a Wednesday morning in March, it's still reasonably quiet at the Laguna Beach Animal Shelter. Although the shelter's two animal control officers have been in and out since about 6 a.m., they are busy responding to calls from the night before and catching up on paperwork before the new day's calls begin. The shelter dogs and cats are still in the heated interior kennels where they have spent the night, warm, comfortable, and isolated from most outside noises.

8:00 a.m. – Shelter staff arrives. Keys rattle and doors open. The dogs begin to bark. They know what those opening doors mean: a romp in the exercise yard, breakfast, and attention, first from staff members, then from the volunteers who arrive at 9 a.m.

8:05 a.m. – Staff members check the telephone answering machine and the shelter office for messages from the night before. Routine phone messages go on the volunteer desk to be answered after the shelter opens at 11 a.m. Animal control-related messages are related to the animal control officers.

Sometimes police officers have left messages telling the staff about animals brought in overnight. These new arrivals stay in the "incoming" area at the back of the shelter. Their conditions can range from simple bewilderment to active hostility to serious illness or injury. Today the only new arrival is a small, sweet tempered female beagle who has taken a walk by herself and will later be claimed by her frantic owner.

8:15 a.m. – Cleaning time begins. The first order of the day is breakfast for all residents. Then staff members change into tall rubber boots and break out the hoses, the pooper scoopers, and the disinfectant. For the next hour-plus they will clean out, hose out, disinfect, and mop off each of the 20 or 30 dog and cat kennels in the shelter. They will set up clean runs for the day ahead and wash all of the blankets and towels used in the kennels the night before – a mountain of laundry. They will also wash the shelter "dishes": dozens of dog and cat bowls, dog and cat toys, and cat boxes.

Soap, water, and disinfectant flow freely. The shelter uses so much disinfectant that a special room is needed to store it all. Much of this cleaning process will be repeated again between 3:00 p.m. and

4:00 p.m. before the shelter closes for the day. Accidents during the day are dealt with immediately. The shelter never smells.

As the cat kennels at the front of the shelter are cleaned, Moses and Lucy, the two resident shelter cats, stalk out of their night quarters to take up supervision of the lobby. Moses, a black and white shorthair, is 13-plus years old and has lived at the shelter for most of his life. Lucy, a shorthaired marmalade tabby, is about nine, but has been a shelter cat for only a few years. Moses has his own basket at the shelter door. Lucy prefers the top of the computer at the volunteers' desk, which is warm. Consensus is that they run the place.

9:00 a.m. – The morning volunteers arrive. Volunteers work four-hour shifts each day, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 12 noon to 4 p.m., ideally with two volunteers on each shift. The morning volunteers clean the lobby, the staff office, and the shelter bathroom. If shelter staff is pressed for time, the volunteers also clean the cages of three other permanent shelter residents, the two cockatiels and one green parrot who live in the lobby.

When their housekeeping is done, the volunteers help staff members however they can to ready the shelter for opening at 11 a.m. On most days, that means walking dogs, washing dogs and cats, taking dogs to and from the exercise yard, helping move and store supplies, watching over puppies in the back exercise yard (“Don’t let them get behind the shed!”), flea combing cats, and doing any other jobs that come along.

9:45 a.m. – With the cleaning out of the way for the moment, staff members move on to care for shelter residents with special needs. This may mean medicating animals in the quarantine area where sick, injured and recovering residents live until they’re well enough to join the general population. Sometimes it’s administering immunizations or removing stitches. Perhaps it’s bottle-feeding orphaned newborns. Sometimes it’s playing with kittens that don’t have a mother to teach them the ropes. A lot of it is training.

Most dogs that come to the shelter need training in basic canine manners. Others need help in becoming “socialized,” which is a fancy word for learning to get along with people and other animals. Still others, both dogs and cats, need extra love and reassurance to help them overcome confusion, depression, or fear. Shelter staff dispenses it all in liberal doses.

10:15 a.m. – Kennel work winds down, and office work starts. All of the dog licenses in the city of Laguna Beach and Laguna Woods are issued through either the Laguna Beach City Hall or the Animal Shelter, which is an entity of the Laguna Beach Police Department. It is licensing time and the paperwork piles up, despite computerization of a portion of the licensing system. Animal-related complaints and questions, the needs of the shelter’s aging physical plant, purchasing, maintenance, overall record keeping, and the ever-present issues of fund raising and public relations also must be addressed on a daily basis.

10:20 a.m. – Because it’s Wednesday, the adoption committee meets to consider the adoption applications. Adoptions are one of the shelter’s most important tasks...and one of its happiest. The shelter staff usually reviews adoption applications twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

The adoption process calls for interested applicants to fill out a form providing some background about themselves, their pet ownership history, and their qualifications for responsible pet ownership. For each animal adopted, the staff carefully considers the needs of the animal and the qualifications of the potential owner, then makes a decision based on what seems best for the animal.

Given the number of animals adopted each month, this review takes time –but it is time well spent. Few animals adopted from the shelter are returned.

11 a.m. – As it does seven days a week, the shelter opens its doors to the public and begins answering its phone. Volunteers will field routine phone calls (lost animals, found animals, referrals to other agencies, general information questions) and routine over-the-counter dealings with the public (“Can we walk through and see the dogs?” “Do you have any kittens?” “Can you help me find a Golden Retriever?”) Shelter staff handles the tough stuff: license issues, animal health questions, questions of animal abandonment or abuse, complaints, animal rescue, shelter policies and procedures, and so forth.

12:30 p.m. – Lunch, sort of. The afternoon volunteer shift arrives for an hour of overlap with the morning shift. Staff members and animal control officers gather in the office to catch up and eat lunch between phone calls and requests for license renewals. Moses and Lucy beg for handouts. No one is completely off duty, but the pace slows for a while.

1 p.m. – The morning volunteer shift waves goodbye for another week, and the afternoon shift takes over the phones and any remaining dog walking. Visitors begin stopping by to look for particular kind of cat or dog or just to look. Dog owners renewing licenses for their pets flood in, at one point lining up three deep at the lobby counter. Staff members are busy with the computer, the licensing forms, and the receipt book. Volunteers not answering phones or walking dogs help keep the license filing up to date. Moses naps on the counter. Lucy arranges herself on the volunteer desk.

2:10 p.m. – A young mother, her two children, and their grandmother arrive to take home Fanny, a small, year-old tan terrier mix with a sweet face, a lively disposition, and enough energy to light up San Diego. While a volunteer goes to get Fanny, a staff member reviews an adoption kit with her new family. The kit provides enough food for Fanny’s transition to her new home and information on licensing, immunizations, housebreaking, training, and maintaining good health. There’s also a temporary dog tag and a pamphlet about the microchip that Fanny, - and all other animals adopted from the shelter – has in her shoulder. If she should get lost without her license tag, most shelters in Orange County can scan the microchip, establish her identity, and help reunite her with her family.

Fanny arrives, and everyone admires her. The children put on her new harness and attach her new leash. Shelter staff and volunteers pat her goodbye, and Fanny trots off to her new life.

2:50 p.m. – Dinner Time. Because the shelter’s normal day ends at 4 p.m., the animals eat early. After they eat, the dogs will go into the exercise yard for their last romp of the day. While they’re playing, shelter staff cleans, disinfects, and mops one more time. Runs are freshened or changed for the night. Any animals in the quarantine kennels are tended gently: medication given, dressings changed, special food prepared, blankets replenished.

3:45 p.m. – In the lobby, the volunteers empty wastebaskets, shake floor mats, and fold them over chairs for the next day’s morning volunteers to replace. In the kennels, the shelter staff closes the dogs into their interiors heated runs for the night. The dogs are used to the routine. They also expect, and get, good night pats from all hands.

Much to their disgust, Moses and Lucy must go back into the cat room with the other cats for the night. The cats too have a clean, heated floor, clean bedding, clean litter boxes, and fresh food and water. They too get good night pats.

4 p.m. – As the afternoon volunteer shift leaves, staff locks the shelter doors. Only one back door remains accessible by key, for police entry during the night if necessary.

4:30 p.m. – The last staff member out locks the gate to the shelter parking lot. Behind her, the barking subsides for another day.