

The Humane Society of the United States | humanesociety.org

A Day in The Life: Animal Shelter Workers Share Their Stories



○○○

Ever wonder what it's like to work or volunteer for an animal shelter or rescue organization? Get a firsthand perspective from seven shelter workers from around the country.

▫ [Megen Gifford, Animal Rescue League of Southern RI, Peace Dale, R.I.](#)

▫ [Brittini Fleming, Osceola County Animal Control, St. Cloud, Fla.](#)

▫ [Ellen Warpinsky, Tails Humane Society, DeKalb, Ill.](#)

▫ [Leigh Grady, Animal Shelter, Inc., Sterling, Mass.](#)

▫ [Maggie Tatum, Elk Country Animal Shelter, Atlanta, Mich.](#)

▫ [Sandra Laing, Angels for Animals Rescue League, Lima, Ohio](#)

▫ [Anne Schroeder, Star Gazing Farm, Boyds, Md.](#)



Megen Gifford, Shelter Manager
[Animal Rescue League of Southern Rhode Island, Peace Dale, R.I.](#)

Every day, I come in, check with the staff, check on the animals, give them their medication, see if the message light on the phone is blinking (it usually is), and check the calendar to see what the day has in store for us. The phone rings and I hope that it is someone calling with a happy ending story, although more often than not it's someone wanting to surrender their pet. In that case, I counsel them on whether or not I think their animal can be adopted, how long they will have to wait for a space at the shelter, what our adoption and euthanasia policies are, and what their other options are. I offer a lot of behavior and training advice for cats and dogs over the phone. Sometimes the people just didn't know what to do and want to work it out, other times people have just given up caring and simply don't want to bother.

The phone keeps ringing—people want to know if we have kittens



(yes), white ones? (no), puppies? (no). People rarely ask if I have adult black and white cats, which I have a lot of.

In a quiet moment, a staff member pulls me aside and asks how to cope when she falls in love with an animal and doesn't get to take him home. She's been here eight months, and I've been watching signs of burn-out building in her for the past three months. I tell her that even after nine years, it still happens, but that it becomes easier with time and practice. Most importantly, I let her know that we all feel that way, and that she can always come to one of us. It's obvious we both want to cry, but then the phone rings again, and we go back to the grind.

We send a cat home and as the adopters walk out the door, we all say, "Hooray Rory's going home!", and then jump right into finishing up the adoption files. Gem the dog suddenly has two mysterious sores on her legs that need to be looked at and treated. We need to figure out how she got them, and if we can prevent them from coming back.

A family who adopted a dog last month walks in the door and instantly my heart stops, then speeds up. Are they bringing him back? No, today they are stopping by to visit, tell that he is the best dog in the world and to show us how well he's doing. I want to hug the dog for being a good dog, and hug the people for letting us know that we really do make a difference.

[back to top](#)

Brittni Fleming, Kennel Supervisor
Osceola County Animal Control, St. Cloud, Fla.

As soon as I enter the shelter parking lot, I notice a box next to the door. I open it slowly as three kittens, barely six weeks old, peer back at me. I carry them into my office and set them on a desk that's already piled high with paperwork. The kittens view this as an invitation to play and begin sorting papers. I hope they can alphabetize. I grab my clipboard, shut the door to keep my assistants confined and proceed to the kennel.

I greet each dog with a happy voice and, in return, am greeted with a happy tail—a good trade on a Monday morning. I read each dog's kennel card and try and guess if they will get a forever home. A good number of dogs have been surrendered by their owner due to behavioral problems or because their owner is moving and, apparently, other states, cities and towns do not accept animals within their boundaries. I must have missed that memo.

As soon as I enter the shelter parking lot, I notice a box next to the door. I open it slowly as three kittens, barely six weeks old, peer back at me.

I proceed through the kennel taking notes and putting them on the cages, notes that read: "check tag info", "re-check for microchip", "please vaccinate—this dog is now friendly". Meanwhile the dog is looking at me with those big eyes as if to say "I was only kidding, I didn't mean to growl at anyone". I, of course, answer him in my best Chihuahua voice; "I know Buddy, I don't blame you. Your owner, however, is a different story. How about I get you a home where you will have proper identification, socialization and a fence. Oh and sorry, let's not forget your neuter surgery". Buddy responds with a low growl and I leave a note on his kennel card that reads "please temperament test."

The next kennel holds Bella, a white and tan pit bull who's a little overweight. Bella's human is currently in jail, a sad situation that occurs when he becomes intoxicated. When they are both free, the two of them are homeless. I see them around town—Bella likes to ride in the basket of an old shopping cart while he pushes her around like a queen. They often come by the shelter for dog food. Bella must think this is her vacation home since this is her third time here. We hold her until her owner is released from jail, and the first thing he does is come and get Bella.

I return to my office where I left the kittens. They have turned the papers on my desk into a pretty good replica of Stonehenge, and are beginning to arrange the pencils in some sort of dog sculpture. I gather them up and place them in a cat condo I brought back with me from the storage area. I deck out the condo with toys, food and a litter box and load them in it. At first their reaction is of surprise, but then they acclimate and start decorating their new place accordingly. Get used to the new pad, I think, it's going to be yours for two weeks. Then you will be old enough and hopefully healthy enough to be adopted.

I sit down at my desk to check my email, return phone calls and read the daily reports from the night staff. Then I head for the break area where my employees wait for me to begin the morning staff meeting.

"Good morning people, it's 8 a.m.—time to start the day."

[back to top](#)

**Ellen Warpinsky, Animal Caretaker and Adoption Counselor
[Tails Humane Society, DeKalb, Ill.](#)**

Every day, I wake up wondering what the day will bring. It could be full of joy and happiness or it could be tear-filled and heart wrenching. More often than not, it's a little of both. Every day there are cat cages to tidy, litter to scoop, dogs to walk and kisses to dole out to all of the fuzzy and feathered. I'm generally a bit frazzled trying to get the public areas spotless and taken care of by the time we open. It's a race against the clock, and it seems like the clock always wins. The general chaos increases as the public

pours in at noon, asking questions, petting, touching, adopting.

We don't have space, but we make room for a litter of orphan kittens. We make room again for an injured cat.

Once the animals are fed and taken care of, it's time to feed the public with information about responsible pet ownership. I explain that some cats need to be coaxed to eat; some dogs will eat

anything—edible or not. Some people don't want to hear a word I have to say regarding their dog's submissive urination. Others are starving for information, asking me to explain in detail the history of clicker training and all of its applications. I try to reach out to them all, just as I try to reach out to each animal with a caress or a kind word. Some people remind me of the kind of dogs that you handle with a rabies pole. They make me cringe inside, but I still try to disarm them with thoughtful answers and a calm smile.

The phone rings over and over. It's raining outside, but I didn't realize it was raining stray cats. We don't have space, but we make room for a litter of orphan kittens. We make room again for an injured cat. We're playing what I affectionately call "cat Tetris". It involves moving one cat, scrubbing its cage for another cat, scrubbing that cat's cage for yet another cat, combining two cats into one cage, scrubbing another cage and ... Voila! We have a cage for the injured cat.

Meanwhile, the evening rush comes in. I'm doing three adoptions at once. My coworkers are struggling to walk dogs among the throngs of people in our adoption area. It's dinner time for the cats, and they're letting us know. I need health exams done on all three animals being adopted, the phone won't stop ringing and I feel terrible for the volunteer trying to learn to do adoptions. Students for our obedience class are trickling in and they want to share updates on their dogs' progress. My head is spinning already, and there's still so much to do tonight.

It isn't until late, after evening walks are done, medications are given, obedience class ends and the doors are locked, that the building falls silent. I turn off the classical music and I can hear the rain on the roof. In the next room, I hear the clicking of a rabbit's water bottle. The puppies snuggle in a heap. The cats are lounging in their cages. All is well for tonight. We'll start over tomorrow. For now, life is good.

[back to top](#)

Leigh Grady, Executive Director
[Animal Shelter, Inc.](#), Sterling, Mass.

My situation is unique as I live on the shelter property. I live, breathe (especially if the **If I didn't work here, I couldn't share the stories ... [about] the**

wind is blowing), eat and sleep shelter life. Sometimes it can feel like a burden, and there are frustrating moments when I think about leaving the field, but I love my job and these animals. Instead

of celebrating holidays with friends and family, I usually lie with the animals in their kennels, petting their soft fur and telling them they will be okay. Disaster rescue, running a spay/neuter clinic for the poor in the most heartbreaking areas of the world, assisting after hurricanes—these are my "vacations". On real vacations I insist on feeding homeless dogs on the beach, chasing stray cats and visiting the local animal shelters.

14-year-old stray shepherd mix who had kidney failure, but who was adopted by a vet tech who gave him four months of love before he died.

I often dream of what I could do for animals if I hit the lottery. Maybe I should actually start playing?

I am truly thankful that my staff is here each and every day. We all come to work in the snow and sleet, during illnesses and personal traumas. We are a small group, and we are pretty tight. I consider them friends, maybe allies. We know what another staff person is thinking with just one glance, stare, eye roll or goofy face. We have code words and phrases that only we understand.

I wonder why I get out of bed every day. But if I didn't, I wouldn't get to share the good stories—like the one about the family with a blind daughter who adopted a blind puppy. Or the deaf puppy who was adopted by a woman who taught at a school for the deaf. Or the 14-year-old stray shepherd mix who had kidney failure, but who was adopted by a vet tech who gave him four months of love before he died. And, if I didn't work here, I certainly couldn't tell you about the small, stray dog that had been beaten and burned. The only person he trusted was a young girl who had been physically, mentally and sexually abused by her father.

Why else would I be here?

[back to top](#)

Maggie Tatum, Volunteer
[Elk Country Animal Shelter](#), Atlanta, Mich.

My day begins with an email from our shelter's vice president, Pauline. She's sent her weekly article highlighting an adoptable dog from the shelter. I add the article, along with a photograph of the pooch, to our website. "Perhaps Lucky will get a home this week," I say out loud. My old Rottweiler, lying behind my desk chair, sighs his hopes for Lucky too.

Humane education and spay and neuter are our shelter's foundation. The Sheriff's Department now manages the shelter, but they rely on our organization and the public to care for the dogs

picked up or abandoned in our rural county—the third poorest in the state. We don't have an animal control officer, so the deputies answer all animal calls and then contact us if there is a medical problem.

Both are on fixed incomes—one woman calls from work because she doesn't have a phone in her home. Both have a female cat to spay, but admit they each have three more intact cats. I promise that somehow the shelter will help.

Updating our shelter's calendar while adding an adoption success story to the website, the phone rings in my son's bedroom and I hear a message being recorded on his answering machine. Tom's away at the University of Michigan, so his line has become the cat spay and neuter number for the shelter.

We schedule mobile spay and neuter clinics for the residents, targeting low-income owners and people willing to keep multiple cats as long as they can get them "fixed" economically.

The number of appointments scheduled for our next fall clinic have risen in the last 24 hours. The two people who left messages on the answering machine have stray cat problems. Returning their calls, I discover both are on fixed incomes—one woman calls from work because she doesn't have a phone in her home. Both explain what they can afford and divulge that they have a female cat to spay, but admit they each have three more intact cats. They schedule only one procedure because they cannot afford to do all four at once, even with reduced costs. I promise that somehow the shelter will help. We want less kittens next spring!

Last weekend, our mobile clinic neutered 13 male cats, spayed 15 female cats, and provided vaccinations and microchips in our community. But it is only October, and our sterilization fund is already depleted, so I begin composing a grant proposal and checking on other financial resources to fund surgeries for the rest of the year. I look at the clock, realize nothing is ready for dinner, the wash is not done, and my dogs are ready for a walk. As we leave, I hear the phone upstairs ringing—another cat needs an appointment.

[back to top](#)



Sandra Laing , Director
[Angels for Animals Rescue League](#), Lima, Ohio

My day typically starts before the sun comes up. I feed and care

for between 10 and 50 adoptable dogs and cats. The shelter and grounds must be taken care of too. That means snow removal, leaf raking, poop patrol and anything else that needs done. The animals need to receive their medications, baths need to be given, animals need to be brushed and, of course, everyone wants to be petted.

Around 8 a.m., the phone starts ringing. We get about 30 to 50 calls per day.

Unfortunately, they are not all wanting to adopt an animal—most want to surrender one.

Last week I rescued a tiny kitten trapped in a storm sewer in the pouring rain.

I do all the paperwork, update the websites and help with a small spay/neuter clinic two days per week that we recently started. I also pick up food, blankets and other donated supplies. By 6 p.m., the phone stops ringing, but the chores need to start again. Everyone gets fed and ready for the night. Our dogs run loose in large fenced, wooded lots all day, playing and socializing. By evening, they are ready to sleep.

I spend evenings returning calls and adding up grocery receipts that we receive funds from through a donation program.

Weekends are spent at adoption events or working on grants and other paperwork, taking pictures of new animals, doing repairs and making lists of supplies we need to order.

We work with our local prison where 12 of our dogs go in groups to participate in a training program. Dogs graduate from the program with "Canine Good Citizen" certificates from the American Kennel Club.

The rewards come just often enough to keep me motivated and a simple thank you means a lot. Why do I do it? Last week I rescued a tiny kitten trapped in a storm sewer in the pouring rain. That is enough reward to last me another year or two.

[back to top](#)



**Anne Schroeder, President
[Star Gazing Farm](#), Boyds, Md.**

So, you want to be a farmer? My name is Farmer Anne, and I run a small farm animal sanctuary in Maryland. Um, correction: I live and work on a farm sanctuary that is headed by a 180 pound Alpine named [Mr. Newman Goat](#). Four years ago Mr. Newman

just showed up, and he's been running the place ever since. It isn't too surprising that a goat would be chief of staff at a farm sanctuary; goats have the smarts, the analytical tools, the strength and bull-headedness to push through difficult times, decisions, and barn doors—and they also have a highly discriminating palate.

When you take rescued [farm] animals in, you take their physical and emotional well being to heart as well, and you cannot simply treat them like livestock.

When I first dreamed of starting such a place—an idyllic dream of happy sheep dancing through fields, cows delivering morning kisses, all manner of birds singing and chirping the sunny days away (all of which is true, does happen, and is, indeed,

idyllic), I did not stop to consider the underpinnings of farm life: Fencing. Drainage. Manure removal. Hauling 300 60-pound bales of hay to a second floor loft in 95 degree heat. Nighttime illnesses requiring constant vigilance in below-zero weather. Poisonous plants. Trespassers. Worry. Financial burden. And death.

As a former city slicker, I'd like to state for the record that farm life, whether a traditional production farm or a farm sanctuary, is not for the faint of heart. The good days are good. The animals happily munch on grass and hay all day, take afternoon naps, have their early evening skirmishes and settle in for a peaceful night's rest under the moon. Donation checks come in the mail, new requests for visits and offers of volunteer help pour in, and all the bills are paid on time. The farmer spends a few hours cleaning buckets, shoveling out the barn, puts out feed at the appointed hour not getting assaulted by any horned beasts in the process, and goes to bed happy.

Then there are the other days. I'm not complaining. No, I'd never go back to city life, both because I wouldn't want to and because Mr. Newman Goat wouldn't stand for it. But here's a reality check: when you take rescued animals in, you take their physical and emotional well being to heart as well, and you cannot simply treat them like livestock. You can't put them in the field and say: Here's your hay, here's your water, lots a luck, Bucko. They want to be talked to, and they insist on talking to me pretty much nonstop. They ask for and expect daily massages. Yes, really. They strongly prefer clean areas to live in, which means that the maid (aka me) is always on duty. Shoot, there are days when the barn is cleaner than the inside of my house.

They like to have fun, which includes breaking down doors and fences and having adventures. And running a farm is expensive. It's not just the feed, and it's not just the vet bills. You've got to have and maintain an infrastructure that provides safe containment and shelter; you've got to pay attention to the health of your fields; you've got to regularly grade out roadways and entrances to barns. And then there is fencing.







But at the end of the day, no matter how deep the mud is, no matter how many bruises I sport, no matter what the financial books look like, this place is blessed. The animals are free, happy, and safe. And that is worth everything.

[back to top](#)

Updated Nov. 13, 2006.

 E-MAIL THIS PAGE

 SHARE    ...

-  [Common Questions about Animal Shelters and Animal Control](#)
-  [Concerned About Your Local Shelter?](#)
-  [Helping Animals in Your Community](#)
-  [How to Find Your Local Animal Shelter](#)
-  [How to Volunteer at Your Local Animal Shelter](#)
-  [The HSUS ASC Program: Helping Shelters Help Communities](#)

