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LOOKING FOR A MIRACLE CURE

THE STATE OF HEALTH CARE



A BAD BUSINESS

Guam's veterinarians are frequently in the news, not least for uneasy relations with each other. But a new bill focuses on the treatment of animals in a community that has an estimated 40,000 pets on the island.

By Jessica Peterson

It was a shocking case, but not a rare one. The orphans were found chained to a wall and had not eaten for days. Their meager water supply was exhausted within hours. When the adoptive parents could remember to, they would throw food scraps at the helpless children who lapped them up within seconds. The starvation and thirst waged a cruel war with the orphans' bodies. Their skin had boils and scabs, their eyes were sunken, and patches of hair fell out. Their cries for help were heard but ignored by neighbors afraid or indifferent. Still, that wasn't the worst. The worst came when one of the orphans got pregnant, delivered the baby, and watched it die. The rotting corpse was not removed for weeks.

Although that sounds like a scene from a horror movie, the scenario was a real situation that developed in the village of Mangilao.

The word "pet" has a broad definition on the island. At one end of the extreme are the indulgent owners who spoil their pets to the point of obesity. At the other end are owners who view their animals as nothing more than property — or worse, as income through bloody and illegal fights. This disparity in the treatment of animals sometimes brings new residents to tears, while other long-time Guamanians are calloused to the point that they don't recognize

the abusive behavior at all.

"The attitudes that we have on Guam are largely because of a tendency of people to feel like it won't change," says Vanessa Oshiro, the main veterinarian at Marianas Vet Care. "You'll just see animals on the road for days and people just become pretty much immune to seeing it. Generally a population will start to try to ignore what you can't change."

There are two organizations on Guam responsible for animals: The Government of Guam's Department of Agriculture and GAIN (Guam Animals in Need). Both are understaffed and underfunded. According to Thomas N. Poole, Guam's territorial veterinarian, his Animal Control staff shrunk from 21 to four for the entire island. He estimates the number of

do 50% more work. Four guys cannot keep up with the demand," says Poole. "Of course I've proposed additional staff. In 2006, when the politicians were getting chased all over by dogs... they promised two more officers a year until we were fully staffed. That never happened."

Velma Harper, doctor of veterinary medicine and owner of Harper Veterinary Hospital, sees a partial solution in the formation of a special group under Guam Police Department to enforce animal welfare laws. She says this group should be composed of volunteers within the department who have "serious interest in enforcement of all animal related laws." She says Animal Control officers at the Department of Agriculture should be

I've never met nicer people than in Guam. I've also never seen this level of abuse.

pets on Guam at 40,000, but emphasizes that no one really knows for sure.

According to the vet clinic on Andersen Air Force Base, there are 1,600 records for 1,987 active duty Air Force service members. Some of the animals reside off base in civilian housing.

"If I had six guys — 50% more — I could

given the authority to issue tickets and citations.

"I do think that the most important factor that will contribute to successful enforcement is the desire to do so," Harper says. "Those who have these jobs have to have the compassion necessary to want to enforce current and proposed laws. You cannot train anyone to be

compassionate and concerned about animal welfare. Either it is in your heart or it is not. Animal neglect and abuse cannot be curtailed unless we hire the best men and women for the job. After 25 years of running a veterinary hospital, I know that very special people have to fill these positions or animal neglect and abuse will not... be curtailed."

Animal Control officers don't have much recourse, Oshiro says. "There are not enough teeth in the laws on Guam to allow more than that to be done. Just a slap on the wrist is not going to change people's attitudes about it."

GAIN runs a single shelter in Yigo as a contractor of GovGuam.

"It costs more than the \$90,000 to \$100,000 per year received from the government just for shelter operations alone," says Faye Varias, publicity chair for GAIN. "We rely heavily on donations. The appropriation hardly ever comes on time. It came half-way through the year last time."

It is a telling fact that GAIN has an after-hours animal drop box outside its doors. "We're not like other organizations," says Varias. "Our situation is unique because we can't close down or cut hours to reduce costs. The animals still need to eat, be cleaned, and cared for daily."

"I grew up here. People come here and are just shocked. I don't want people to become immune to it, but they do," she says.

That shock resonated on Jan. 25 as dozens packed into the legislature building in downtown Hagåtña. Vets and pet lovers were gathered for a public hearing to upgrade the criminal penalties of the cruelty to animals code in response to Bill No. 9-31, introduced by Sen. Judith P. Guthertz.

The original section on the Guam books was "unconstitutionally vague" according to Karon Johnson, assistant U.S. attorney and current legislative chair for GAIN. She spoke in favor of the new bill, which would leave no question as to the definition of neglect and mistreatment of animals. While the current animal cruelty law allows for up to 30 days in jail, the supporters of the new Guthertz bill would make animal abuse in the first degree a third degree felony. Mental health counseling and anger management classes would be required of convicted offenders. All eight senators on the panel were in vocal support of the bill.

Harper estimates that an average of five

animals are steadily abandoned at her clinic yearly. "Neglect is a common thing to see — either intentional or out of ignorance. [Neglect accounts for] about 30% of the animals I see," she says.

Oshiro is hopeful that Bill 9 will bring the issue of animal care into the public view in a way that elicits positive change. "I would hope that this would lead to greater education so people would have more of a sense that it's not appropriate to have an animal outside in severe weather with no shelter. The kind of enclosures that they're sometimes in are kind of shocking."

Cindy Bartels, president of the board

There's great literature, research out there that shows the connection between animal cruelty and violence. Jeffrey Dahmer had a history of abusing animals.

for GAIN, gave moving testimony about a particular Dalmatian who was present at the hearing as a living testimony to abuse. Macon was found caged and starving, a meager 29 pounds. Within a few weeks of rescue, Macon almost doubled his weight. "This type of cruelty denigrates the very core of our community. We're better than this," said Bartels with the audience in tears.

Current Macon owner Julie Grady, the director of GAIN, submitted a written testimonial about his rescue. "Macon suffered for weeks, maybe even months without even the bare minimum of his needs met," Grady wrote. "He was literally locked in a cage without adequate food, water or shelter from the intense heat or rain... The owners were not cited by either organization [GAIN or the Department of Agriculture]."

"When Macon came home with us he was suffering from severe dehydration, demodectic mange, grossly complicated by dermatitis, open sores and the obvious pain of extreme starvation. His skin was cracked, red, and riddled with infection. He was in such incredible pain, I could only watch with tears in my eyes as he would desperately try to sit or lay

VETERINARY TRAINING

Before attending veterinary college, vet students earn a four-year bachelor's degree in a veterinary-related field, such as animal science. They are then required to earn a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from an accredited veterinary university. Some of the nation's top veterinary universities include Cornell University, Colorado State and the University of Pennsylvania. After obtaining a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree, potential veterinarians must pass their state's board exam before practicing as a veterinarian.

GUAM'S ANIMAL DOCTORS

Harper Veterinary Hospital

Velma Harper, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine; Owner of Harper Veterinary Hospital; Owner of Harper Valley Quarantine Kennels; Owner of Paws2Heaven Pet Crematory

Years in business: 26

Experience: "Before coming to Guam, after graduation, I worked for a year in Pasadena, Calif. traveling throughout the southland with a veterinarian who specialized in orthopedic surgeries. I was then the Extension Veterinarian at the University of Guam for nine months. I then became an associate veterinarian at Marianas Veterinary Hospital. After 10 months there, I opened Harper Veterinary Hospital."

Specialties: Soft tissue and orthopedic surgery

Marianas Vet Care

Vanessa Oshiro, Associate Veterinarian

Years in business: Oshiro has 11 years practicing and has been the main doctor at Marianas Vet Care for the last year.

Experience: "I'm from Guam, graduated from Simon Sanchez High School in '88; went away for college in Washington and Hawaii." Oshiro earned a bachelor's of science degree in Microbiology in 1993 from the University of Hawaii at Manoa and a doctor of veterinary medicine degree from Washington State University in 2000.

Wise Owl Animal Care

Joel Joseph, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine

Years in business: 5 years in Guam, 9 years in Pohnpai, 10 years in Detroit

Education: Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine Class of 1986; additional advanced training in ophthalmology, theriogenology, and animal dentistry.

down only to struggle to stand again, because the pain of his bones and his skin touching anything was too much for him to bear. He would scream! Yes, scream and whimper while attempting to sleep standing up as he must have been utterly exhausted...but no sleep came for him — the pain was too much,” Grady says.

Katherine McCoy followed in giving testimony. She is a non-practicing veterinarian who has lived and worked as a military vet in Belgium and Germany. “I’ve never met nicer people than in Guam. I’ve also never seen this level of abuse,” she said.

There was an overwhelming consensus stated that the kindness of Guam’s residents is in puzzling opposition to the cruelty shown towards animals. Others submitted written testimonials such as Lilian Whitfield who described finding what she thought was a dead piglet. It turned out to be a puppy corpse painted blue and dumped by the side of the road. Whitfield observed that the dog’s eyes were not painted and concluded it had been tortured before being killed.

While these are extreme cases, they are numerous.

Guam’s court system regularly sees cases of domestic violence.

There is a studied link between animal and human abuse.

Poole relates a situation where Animal Control officers did write a citation, but said that in most cases no further action is taken after pet owners are warned. “One guy tried to clip the ears of his dog, a pit bull, with scissors. He did it at home trying to save money... He was actually laughing about it. I told him, ‘I’m citing you for animal cruelty and he started crying.’” The fine was \$50 because it was an egregious offense.

“If this thing goes through, we’ll have people’s attention,” says Poole. “One simple element on this is too often when a person is accused of beating his wife or child there’s no prior history. He can say, ‘They’re lying; they fell and tripped.’ If you’ve got a prior felony conviction for animal abuse, then the guy goes away for a long time. There’s great literature, research out there that shows the connection between animal cruelty and violence. Jeffrey Dahmer had a history of abusing animals.”

What Poole says is also verified by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence which reports the following:



Thomas Poole, territorial veterinarian of Guam, makes a house call to care for horses in Yigo.

- 71% of pet-owning women entering women’s shelters reported that their batterer had injured, maimed, killed or threatened family pets for revenge or to psychologically control victims; 32% reported their children had hurt or killed animals.
- 68% of battered women reported violence towards their animals. 87% of these incidents occurred in the presence of the women, and 75% in the presence of the children, to psychologically control and coerce them.
- 13% of intentional animal abuse cases involve domestic violence.
- Between 25% and 40% of battered women are unable to escape abusive situations because they worry about what will happen to their pets or livestock should they leave.
- Pets may suffer unexplained injuries, health problems, permanent disabilities at the hands of abusers, or disappear from home.
- Abusers kill, harm, or threaten children’s pets to coerce them into sexual abuse or to force them to remain silent about abuse. Disturbed children kill or harm animals to emulate their parents’ conduct, to prevent the abuser from killing the pet, or to take out their aggressions on another victim.
- In one study, 70% of animal abusers also had records for other crimes. Domestic violence victims whose animals were abused saw the animal cruelty as one more violent episode in a long history of indiscriminate violence aimed at them and their vulnerability.

• Investigation of animal abuse is often the first point of social services intervention for a family in trouble.

• Animal cruelty problems are people problems. When animals are abused, people are at risk.

With an understanding of these facts, some U.S. states are moving towards more exacting laws against animal cruelty.

The Suffolk County, New York legislature unanimously approved a bill to create a law establishing a county registry for animal abuse offenders, the first of its kind in the nation. California is considering the same bill. The new law allows the county to create a public registry of convicted animal abusers, in which the names, aliases, addresses and photographs of animal abusers would be compiled in a searchable database, much like the state’s sex offender registry. The convicted abusers would pay a \$50 annual fee for upkeep of the registry, and those who fail to register would be charged \$1,000 or face jail time.

A public hearing in the N.Y. for a second bill, which would require pet stores and animal shelters to check the registry before allowing anyone to purchase or adopt an animal, was tabled for a later date. If approved, that law would prohibit pet stores from selling an animal to a convicted abuser.

Roy Gross, who heads the Suffolk County

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, said his group, which deals with more than 2,000 animal abuse cases in the county per year, believes the animal abuse registry will help to save animals. “Most serial killers began as animal abusers,” he said. “It’s a known fact: people who hurt animals hurt people too.”

The New Zealand SPCA is taking animal abusers to task by naming them in its annual List of Shame and detailing cruel and grotesque offences.

Sen, Tony Ada says the abuse is heightened because pet owners are uneducated about proper animal care.

David Crisostomo, *Pacific Daily News* managing editor, echoed the sentiment at the legislature hearing. Crisostomo is a member of the 671 Bully Club, which he says holds pit bull shows demonstrating the dogs’ strength and agility. The dog-owner said he is opposed to cock fighting and dog fighting and supports the bill with the amendment to define “adequate space and room for exercise.” He cautioned that animal-lovers must not take a “cowboy” approach to enforcement of the animal cruelty code. He says only officials should be allowed to enter private property to rescue animals.

“The numbers are disturbing,” says Oshiro, a Guam native. “They euthanize thousands of animals every year on Guam at GAIN. Whatever we can do to minimize waste of life — I’m for that. As long as it’s handled in a manner that is respectful and it does not foment ill will towards people who feel they don’t have a reason to change.

“GAIN has had a tendency to be very sensitive to the cultural aspects of things. I don’t think anyone is for hitting anyone over the head with this. If you’re too hard about the whole situation and how it’s approached, people will do the exact opposite. We want to see it succeed. Enforcement should happen over a gradual period and people will take notice that this law is now in effect and it will potentially help educate people,” she says.

Joel Joseph, owner of Wise Owl Animal Care, says 20 or more animals a month are abandoned or put up for adoption at his clinic. “The solution to pet neglect and abuse is education. You can pass all the laws and do all the talking you want but education is where it starts. Without it nothing will succeed,” says Joseph.

Pet owners with loose dogs are warned

that they are in violation of the law, and subsequently Animal Control officers, Guam Police Department and the mayors are authorized by law to enter a property and remove any pet from public or private property. By law, dog owners must keep their dogs securely on their property.

Velma Harper says animal husbandry

the leash law is not enforced here on Guam. Additionally, we see many animals that are hit by cars for the same reason.”

Some of the island’s most powerful people may never see animal abuse up close as reported here. It’s far less visible on the streets of Tumon or Hagåtña. It is only through the clear voices of Guam’s civic and business leaders that change

GAIN has had a tendency to be very sensitive to the cultural aspects of things. I don’t think anyone is for hitting anyone over the head with this

education is a key to preventative care. “We see many animals that are not vaccinated and hence succumb to diseases that are preventable. We see many animals that are loaded with intestinal worms and covered in fleas and ticks, all issues that can be addressed with simple veterinary visits. Heartworm is a big problem here, also because of lack of knowledge regarding prevention. We see a large number of animals that are attacked by other animals because

will be enacted.

“Unfortunately, the soft approach has not worked, where you just try to do it behind the scenes,” says Oshiro. “In the space of 20-plus years I would have expected more to happen than has. If the bill passes it brings that issue to the forefront. It makes it officially a bigger penalty enough that people would have to take notice.”



Velma Harper, owner of Harper Veterinary Hospital, with Dolly, a trained Guam Police Department dog.