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Pen Pals Inc., the Dixon Correctional Institute and Louisiana’s Post-Katrina Animal Rescue Legacy

By Colonel John C. Smith and Bernard Unti
The dog covers the agility course with gusto, veering around weave poles, jumping hurdles, pushing through tunnels and tires, bounding over teeter boards, then racing back to the man waiting at the starting gate. It’s a scene that could unfold on any day somewhere in America — on a ball field, in a park or in someone’s backyard. In this case, however, it’s happening behind the walls of a medium-security prison as part of a remarkable program at the Dixon Correctional Institute (DCI) in Jackson, La., that includes a full-scale animal shelter staffed by offenders.
The Rescue

The Pen Pals Inc. Animal Shelter is a legacy project of Hurricane Katrina, and a distinctive collaboration between the Louisiana Department of Corrections (DOC) and The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). The partnership was born in the crucible of Hurricane Katrina, when DCI took in 200 dogs and cats displaced by the storm to ease the time-critical rescue burden falling on response organizations like HSUS and regional agencies. HSUS, with hundreds of staff members and volunteers in the Gulf Coast region, was looking for facilities with capacity to hold displaced pets and other animals; the community at DCI, including management, staff, inmates and others, was looking for ways to be of service in a time of distress and great need. Veterinarians, emergency responders and a dozen inmates set up a makeshift shelter at the prison, 30 miles north of Baton Rouge, and went to work to stabilize the circumstances of the animals and lay the foundation for their rehoming. A few months later, HSUS and DCI officials came together to extend their partnership through the construction and establishment of a permanent animal shelter and emergency relief facility on the DCI grounds, and HSUS made a grant of $600,000 to bring this vision to life.

From the start, DCI had some advantages. DCI, like many prisons, has had a long history of working with animals, especially agricultural species, and in recent years, service dogs, law enforcement dogs and other similar types. James M. LeBlanc, the warden at the time the program was implemented, had a heart for animals and was a strong advocate for the program — which he continues to champion as secretary of corrections for Louisiana. Longtime HSUS staff member Debra Parsons-Drake lent her expertise to the design of a shelter. Veterinarians associated with HSUS worked well with the offenders and showed that they cared about not only animals, but people, too. Finally, the emergence of a dedicated shelter medicine program and curriculum at the Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine, another beneficiary of HSUS funds in the post-Katrina years, anchored the initiative at DCI by meeting all of its core veterinary care and training needs.

For the few individuals recruited to the program, some five to eight at a time, working at the shelter is a very serious charge. They each have responsibility for a number of animals, and they are involved with decisions concerning the animals’ health, training and schedule for adoption. They consult with supervisors and with one another about refinements in training, behavioral challenges with the animals and more. Today, nearly five years after the shelter opened in 2010 (on the fifth anniversary of Katrina), Pen Pals houses about 80 dogs and a dozen cats at a time; inmates and staff have helped to train and find homes for 625 dogs and 451 cats. Pen Pals also provides animal care and control services to East Feliciana, a rural parish of 20,000 residents, where DCI is located.

DCI may boast the first animal shelter at any prison, but the practice of prisoners working with animals has a history nearly a century long. The animal-friendly Governor Percival P. Baxter of Maine placed the first prison therapy dog at the Maine State Prison, in Thomaston, Maine, in 1924, making a present of an Irish setter to the inmates at the opening of the newly rebuilt facility. Since then, the idea of having offenders care for and socialize with animals has continued to inspire advocates for both animals and good prison programs. A number of prisons across the country have partnered with animal shelters and rescue groups; currently, there are a few dozen such programs in place, taking different forms depending on the opportunities for partnership with local institutions and humane societies, veterinary schools, government agencies and other stakeholders. In some cases, these initiatives are taking the place of the kind of workforce development programs that used to employ prisoners — programs that are in decline. But the benefits go far beyond workforce training.

The Value

There are, of course, employment opportunities for prisoners who leave DCI with experience at Pen Pals Inc., and everyone associated with the program
would like to see inmates transition back into the community with a job offer in hand or in prospect. A number of offenders have taken correspondence courses and worked closely with the LSU veterinarians to advance their skills as technicians and assistants, and many have demonstrated exceptional technical abilities and capacity to learn. The potential for placement of the right candidates is strong, and it’s an implicit goal of the program to demonstrate its value as a contribution to the objectives of successful reentry and transition from jail to the community.

For the offenders, though, the real value comes with the personal satisfaction — the love and friendship of animals and the opportunity to help animals to find their forever homes or to go on to train as service animals in one arena or another. Many of the individuals sentenced to serve at DCI are hardened men, with hard hearts and hard personalities, born of life’s bad turns and decisions. The presence of animals is calming and physically and emotionally beneficial. They are healthier and happier as a result of working with the dogs. It makes them feel productive, some for the first time in their lives, and ties them to animal protection — a cause that is larger than themselves. For the individuals who participate, it’s rehabilitation of an emotional and a practical nature, too, and their prosocial development is evident.

The program also provides an important boost for the animal welfare community. There are 3 million homeless but healthy animals euthanized every year at the nation’s animal shelters, be they private charitable societies or municipal animal service entities. The humane movement needs help to bring that tragic number down, and the solution rests, in part, on delivery of the very services being provided at DCI: the fostering, socialization, training and essential veterinary care that make an animal more readily adoptable. The contribution of animal welfare infrastructure and services in a community is not a trivial contribution, for meeting such needs can be costly. In this respect, the program at DCI is a valuable benefit to the citizens of Louisiana.

Tips for Modeling DCI’s Pen Pals Program

Those seeking to emulate the program at DCI would do well to take account of some key factors that help make the Pen Pals Inc. program a success, for some constants will arise with any program of this kind.

First, the program has enjoyed exceptional support from the Louisiana DOC, as well as from HSUS and the Louisiana State University (LSU) School of Veterinary Medicine. Strong internal support and good external partners are necessary for a program to flourish. There are now hundreds of Louisianans who have adopted dogs and cats from Pen Pals Inc., and they, too, have played their part in this special and wonderful collaboration — so have local law enforcement agencies in East Feliciana Parish, which are the customary source of strays and drop-offs eventually taken in at Pen Pals. A wonderful group of
citizens has coalesced around Pen Pals as part of its volunteer corps, and these supporters provide additional time and energy for adoption events, transport and other services.

Second, the **resources needed for such an initiative can be substantial.** There are not too many places one can build an animal shelter for $600,000, but it is certainly possible to do so on the grounds of a prison, with a reliable supply of skilled and unskilled labor. Funds for the construction of suitable facilities are essential for this kind of enterprise. The success of such programs will depend on strong support from philanthropic sources, such as community foundations, private foundations and charitable organizations.

**Staffing has its specific requirements, too.** Like most programs of this kind, Pen Pals screens inmates to make sure that candidates have no history of violence or sexual or animal abuse. A successful program relies not just on careful evaluations of inmates, but also of external parties who will work with them and the animals. Working behind the razor wire of a prison is not for everyone, and citizens who collaborate with the program must be properly oriented about safety, security and the psychology of the environment in which they will assist.

**Good training for all participants** is a mandatory element. Pen Pals is a learning environment and a professional environment. LSU students and faculty teach the inmates how to provide daily care for the dogs and cats, and how to administer vaccinations, heartworm treatment, eye drops, antibiotics and other medications. Prisoners use veterinary manuals to enhance their understanding of the animals in their care and also learn how to identify illnesses such as rabies, parasites and heartworms. They take great pride in demonstrating their intimate knowledge of animals’ health histories and testing their diagnoses and appraisals against those of the professional veterinarians and veterinary students who work with them.

It would take quite an investment of resources to construct and manage animal shelters like the one at DCI in all of our nation’s prisons. Not every prison program will have qualified and available dog trainers and animal care personnel, or the benefit of such strong support from a veterinary school shelter medicine program. For the foreseeable future, other models for collaboration are probably more realistic for most institutions. Those interested in such initiatives will have to take stock of the resources available to them in their areas, and develop their programs organically.

**Conclusion**

The tangible results of the DCI pet shelter include more animals adopted into loving homes throughout the region, and a number of people inside the correctional system who feel better about themselves and, perhaps, a little better prepared for life on the outside. Several inmates have taken correspondence course training to supplement their clinical experience and have made a start on related careers back in their communities. Not long ago, one graduate of the program wrote to the lead veterinarian, “The experience and knowledge you and the other doctors and your students have given me will always be a big part of my life. Even if I do not use it as a career. ... The knowledge you all have shared will continue to have a positive impact on me and my future.”

When it comes to the immediate effects at DCI, however, there’s no question about the program’s value. There is nothing like the presence of a dog to brighten up a person’s day, whether in the breakfast room, at the office or on the cell block. Secretary LeBlanc, in the earliest stages of the program, said it best: “The inmates know that the animals look at them just as another human being, and not an inmate. They pick up on the unconditional love that they receive from the animals. It’s really been a good thing.”

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