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Livingston County Animal Control sees significant decline in euthanization cases

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Livingston County Animal Control Director Debbie Oberle is greeted by a tail-wagging beagle mix, a newly taken-in stray kept in the office area of the shelter for observation while Oberle takes a call. Two years ago, local animal activists were calling for changes at Livingston County Animal Control and often urged the county to fire its director. They said too many cats and dogs were being euthanized, getting animals adopted wasn't a priority and volunteers weren't welcome. Not long after, the director was let go and Oberle was hired in November 2010. Today, activists say Livingston County Animal Control is a kinder, gentler place — and euthanizations have sharply dropped off at the county department. / Photo by GILLIS BENEDICT/DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

Written by
Jim Totten
DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

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Two years ago, animal activists were calling for changes at Livingston County Animal Control and often urged the county board to fire the department's director.

They said too many cats and dogs were being euthanized, getting animals adopted wasn't a priority and volunteers weren't welcome. Not long after, the director was let go and Debbie Oberle was hired in November 2010.

Today, activists say Animal Control is a kinder, gentler place where euthanizations have sharply dropped off.

Visitors can freely walk through the facility to check out animals, adoptions happen the same day and the facility is holding numerous off-site adoption events to ensure animals find a home. On a recent visit, Brownie — a cat covered in a swirl of brown, beige and black fur — played on Oberle's desk, and Rojo, a dog, greeted visitors in the office.

"The staff here has just done a wonderful job," Oberle said. "They're the ones who wanted to save every adoptable animal."

She said there are 30 regular volunteers who walk dogs, clean cages, assist with adoption events and help spread the word about animals that need to be adopted. She created a Facebook page that reaches a large audience as well.

Oberle said the changes have helped reduce euthanizations even as the shelter took in 332 more cats — a 37 percent increase — in 2011.

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Debbie Oberle, director of Livingston County Animal Control for the past two years, answers e-mail with a minor challenge from an ill-positioned front paw of her "office buddy," a tortoise-shell cat named Brownie. / Photo by GILLIS BENEDICT/DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

For several years under the previous director, the facility used to euthanize about 30 percent of its dogs and 67 percent of its cats.

Under Oberle's first year, the facility euthanized 8 percent of its dogs and 28 percent of its cats. She expects those numbers to decrease even more for 2012.

Although euthanizations were higher, there's evidence the former Animal Control director had begun making improvements. According to 2009 records, euthanizations plummeted compared to 2008. The cat euthanization rate went from 67 percent in 2008 to 25 percent in 2009, and the dog euthanization went from 32 percent to 8 percent. Oberle said she couldn't explain what caused such a large drop in those rates, which had been

constant for several years. A review showed there wasn't any significant increase in adoptions.

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