Ban Gas Chambers

The Federation of Humane Organizations

Objective: to eliminate gas chambers as a means of euthanizing animals in shelters.

Introduction

July 2013

Since shelters began accepting companion animals, they have also been euthanizing them. When there is no more room, or animals are sick or injured beyond rehabilitation, shelter workers are faced with the daunting task of taking the animals' lives. One such method, used in many locales around the country, is the gas chamber. Thought to be an efficient method for mass euthanasia, it is also one of the more inhumane methods.

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POSITION PA

West Virginia passed legislation¹ outlawing the use of the gas chamber in animal shelters except where there was already a functioning chamber.

If a county had a working gas chamber before August 29, 2009, from a company that routinely manufacturers and installs gas chambers, it is allowed to continue using it. However, the chamber has to be inspected and must comply with strict regulations that became effective June 16, 2011. Only a Certified Animal Euthanasia Technician (CAET) can operate the chamber.

The Federation of Humane Organizations of West Virginia (FOHO WV) opposes the use of gas chambers to euthanize animals in shelters.

What is wrong with the gas chamber?

Far too many healthy cats and dogs, kittens and puppies die for

lack of homes. However, they should not have to die in fear, pain, and suffering-all of which can happen to them in a gas chamber. Some chambers hold as many as 20 animals. These animals are conscious when they are placed in the chamber. They are afraid and, therefore, may become aggressive toward the other animals in the chamber. The animals may live for anywhere from 20 minutes to half an hour in these chambers before death takes them. Some come out still breathing only to be put back in with another group of scared, whining, biting, scrabbling animals.

In addition, gas chambers pose a risk to shelter employees who are exposed to carbon monoxide when they load and unload or clean gas chambers. A 2007 American Veterinary Medical Association report warns, "[Carbon monoxide gas is].... hazardous to personnel because of the risk of explosions ... or health effects resulting from chronic exposure.... Leaky or faulty equipment may lead to slow, distressful death and be hazardous to other animals and to personnel."² The report warns that electrical equipment, such as lights, fans, etc., in the vicinity of the gas chamber, is vulnerable to explosions. Additionally, shelters rarely use CO monitors or make nearby electrical equipment explosion proof. Carbon monoxide is odorless and colorless and can easily go undetected before it reaches lethal limits.

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The Federation of Humane Organizations of West Virginia, INC. website promoting animal welfare throughout the state.

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The humane way to euthanize animals

While the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) condones the use of the gas chamber for euthanasia of shelter animals, *the AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals*, does state, "euthanasia by intravenous injection of an approved euthanasia agent remains the preferred method for euthanasia of dogs, cats, and other small companion animals. Gas chambers are not recommended for routine euthanasia of cats and dogs in shelters and animal control operations."³

Euthanasia by injection does not pose a risk to shelter staff even if the CAET administering the drug sticks him or herself with the needle. It would take a syringe much larger than the one used to euthanize even a large dog and it would have to be injected directly into a vein to have an effect on a human. It would be completely unlikely for that to occur so the danger to humans is extremely slight. Euthanasia by injection is the method recommended by every national humane organization and the National Animal Control Association. FOHO WV considers lethal injection of sodium pentobarbital, administered by competent, trained personnel, to be the method of choice for humane euthanasia of dogs, cats, other small animals, and horses.

If a shelter has a gas chamber and a qualified CAET to operate it, as is required by law, then that same CAET can be trained in euthanasia by injection.

Cost vs. convenience

According to the Animal Welfare Institute, to kill an animal by carbon monoxide poisoning costs \$4.98 per animal versus \$2.29 per animal by lethal injection.⁴ While more animals can be killed at one time in a gas chamber, should convenience on the part of the shelter staff outweigh the animals' rights to a "good death"?

Even vicious animals should be handled with dignity at the time of their death. There are options for shelter workers to handle vicious or wild animals safely. The animal can be confined by a control pole or squeeze gate to make administering sedatives with a pole syringe relatively safe for the staff.

Solution

There are shelters and animal control operations that do not have access to controlled substances and/ or the personnel authorized by the Drug Enforcement Administration to administer them. Therefore, they are unable to take advantage of the more humane way to euthanize shelter animals—euthanasia by injection. However, even those organizations should be moving in the direction of euthanasia by injection instead of death by gas chamber.

The ultimate solution, of course, is to reduce the number of unwanted animals entering shelters across the state and across the country.

• Spay/neuter initiatives are one such way to reduce the number of unwanted animals being born.

• Eliminating puppy mills as a source of the overpopulation of dogs is another.

• Educating the general public on how best to care for their animals so they are not relinquished at animal shelters will reduce the number of animals entering shelters.

• Educating the shelter community on more creative ways to advertise the animals they have for adoption will increase the number of animals leaving shelters for forever homes, which should be the goal of every animal shelter.

• Some ways to increase public awareness for a shelter or animal control agency are through advertising, social media, on-site adoption centers in community pet stores that do not sell puppies and kittens, and other venues that will allow animals to be brought in for adoption fairs.

Every shelter animal who is not going to find a new home should be treated with dignity and given as painless a death as is possible; yet 31 states still permit the use of gas chambers to euthanize animals.⁵

One of the 12 Guiding Principles of The National Humane Education Society is: "To urge that when it is necessary to put any...animal to death, unless some better method of euthanasia is available, it be so arranged that the animal be held in the arms of some human friend while it is being given a painless, preliminary anesthetic, to be stroked and comforted with reassuring words until it loses consciousness, after which the lethal agent should be quickly administered."6

Once all other avenues have been exhausted to find a companion animal a new home, then, and only then, should euthanasia by injection be administered. And never should a gas chamber ever be used.

Endnotes

1. West Virginia State Code, http:// www.legis.state.wv.us/legisdocs/ code/19/WVC%2019%20%20-%20 20%20%20-%20%20%208%20%20. htm

2. AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia, http://oacu.od.nih.gov/regs/AVMA_ Euthanasia-2007.pdf

3. Euthanasia Guidelines: The Gas Chamber Debate, http://atwork.avma. org/2013/02/26/euthanasia-guidelines-the-gas-chamber-debate/

4. Support H. Res. 208 to Encourage States to Abandon Gas Chamber Euthanasia in Animal Shelters, http:// awionline.org/action-ealerts/supporth-res-208-encourage-states-abandon-gaschamber-euthanasia-animal-shelters

5. Map of states that use the gas chamber, http://animalaidusa.org/legislation/animal-gas-chamber/

6. The National Humane Education Society 12 Guiding Principles, http:// www.nhes.org/sections/view/82

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