



Counties killing dogs, cats by the thousands

By [Patrick Fox](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

4:54 a.m. Monday, April 19, 2010

Troubled times are dooming more dogs and cats in metro Atlanta, and the same poor economy that puts animals in the pound ensures that many won't get out.

Counties are cutting budgets at a time when animal shelters are putting down a growing number of animals. In the past two years, the number of cats and dogs destroyed at animal shelters in the five core metro counties has risen 24 percent. Last year, the counties killed almost 30,000 cats and dogs in Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton and Gwinnett.

Gwinnett County led 2009 with 7,588 cats and dogs put down, almost half of them because the shelter could not house them.

"We are trying to help citizens who are having financial trouble and can't feed their animals by giving them food donated to the shelter by local merchants," said Gwinnett police Lt. Mary Lou Respass, who is director of the county's animal shelter. "The shelter also helps sponsor events at local pet supply stores to promote adoptions and is planning a free spay and neuter clinic this spring for pit and pit mixes, the most common breed at the shelter."

All the adoption promotions in the world will never solve the problem, said Virginia Keller, president of the Spay Neuter Action Coalition of Georgia.

"These people just don't get it," she said. "There will never be enough homes for all the animals that are produced at today's rate. Never. The answer to this problem is strictly spay and neuter."

Keller said she has seen people repeatedly drop off puppies or kittens at the shelter with no thought that they could end the cycle with a simple operation on their dogs. Others, she said, get a \$1,000 pure-bred puppy and think they're going to get their money back by breeding it. But instead, it wanders down the street and produces some mixed-breed pups that the owner has to try to give away, she said.

"They think animal control is an adoption center," Keller said. "No way. I don't know how you get this idea across to people, unless they want to come and watch it happen."

Another tack many animal rights groups take is offering to volunteer at shelters. Several groups in Gwinnett have said they would drum up volunteers, but Respass has said there are liability issues to consider when working inside the kennels.

There are some things volunteers can do. Gwinnett's shelter has begun a program to get volunteers to walk the dogs. Gail La Berge, who heads the county animal advisory council, said the staff has found the

dog-walking program improves the animals' disposition and makes them more adoptable. She also said volunteers can sign up online and commit to times of their choice.

The Gwinnett shelter has also explored expanding hours into evenings to allow working families more time to visit and shop for a pet. Statistics show a noticeable increase in adoptions when the shelter remains open late, La Berge said, but budget cuts won't allow for overtime, so the shelter is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

The lean budget prompted the advisory council in mid-March to recommend increasing fees. The council, which recommends policy changes to the county commission, voted to double the charge for daily boarding to \$10 and for quarantine to \$200. But members balked at a suggestion to more than double the owner surrender fee from \$20 to \$50, fearing owners would abandon their animals on the streets. The fee was increased to \$25.

Respass said the shelter offers reduced rates of \$60 for spaying and neutering for animals that are being reclaimed, in lieu of the reclaim fee and subsequent boarding fees. The service includes rabies, DHLPP shots and microchip.

Other animal assistance groups operate on fewer dollars but with as much devotion.

"I think the increase is due to people losing their jobs," said Samantha Shelton, founder and president of Furkids, the largest no-kill shelter in Georgia. "Yet there are so many resources out there that are available to people."

Furkids operates a 5,000 square-foot facility for cats near Doraville. It also runs seven full-time adoption centers and has 20 active foster homes for dogs and kittens.

Over the past two years, the organization has seen donations plummet, yet it still offers free food and medical care to help owners keep their pets during tough times.

"I wish we could keep more of these pets in their homes, rather than people turning them over to animal control," Shelton said.

Euthanasia counts at metro county shelters

	2007	2008	2009
Clayton			
Cats	1,867	2,095	2,258
Dogs	3,095	3,715	4,099
Cobb			
Cats	3,394	4,058	4,000
Dogs	3,095	3,715	4,099
DeKalb			
Cats	1,077	1,895	1,843

Dogs	2,751	3,390	3,619
Fulton			
Cats	464	400	565
Dogs	2,664	2,573	1,958
Gwinnett			
Cats	3,169	4,025	4,588
Dogs	2,763	2,966	3,020
Totals	23,874	28,091	29,612

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