

Giving homeless dogs a fighting chance Animal control officers push for shelter construction

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It was a rough week for animal control officers Gina Cahill and Jean Murray who had to put down three more dogs.

Cahill and Murray have worked closely with Helen Street resident Doloris Giannini, a member of the Hamden Animal Shelter Committee, to push the town administration to build a town animal shelter.

"There are too many sad stories," Giannini said. "These animals are not inanimate pieces of property. We have to reach out to the community for help for these dogs."

The North Haven Animal Shelter currently houses a few of Hamden's homeless dogs. Cahill, who has been with Hamden's animal control department since 2003, said she hopes to find homes in Hamden for these animals.

It costs the town \$10 per day to hold the animals in North Haven, she said, which becomes a hefty sum after months of not finding someone to adopt the animals.

"A couple of months become a couple thousand dollars," Cahill said. "It kills us to have to put these animals to sleep, but not many people give them a chance."

Many of the animals Cahill and Murray see are older and sometimes injured, which makes it more difficult for the officers to find suitable homes for the animals.

"Many of these dogs are sweet and energetic but just need the right care," Cahill said. "But many people just come in and don't take the time to get to know the animals."

Once the control officers find a dog they must hold it for seven days before

putting it up for adoption, Cahill said. "That gives the owner the chance to claim the animal," she said.

After the seven days are up, Cahill and Murray begin advertising the dog for adoption.

Last week Giannini accepted numerous donations from Hamden and neighboring towns for Holly, one of the shelter dogs in need of leg surgery.

"I received many donations including anonymous ones," she said. "But the one that really got to me was a donation I received from a little girl who sent me a dollar from her allowance."

Holly is now in a loving home with a Hamden resident.

Murray, who celebrates 27 years as Hamden's animal control officer, said she hopes to educate residents, especially children, about the importance of taking care of pets.

The town is currently in violation of state animal statutes in terms of caring for strays, Giannini said. After months of planning the town has settled on a site at the corner of Rocky Top and Shepard Avenue and soon will choose one of seven designs for the new shelter, according to Giannini.

"The contract will be awarded soon, but we will have to go through a very lengthy process before we get a shelter up and running," she said.

Once a design is chosen the lengthy process of getting the shelter started will begin.

"We will have to go through the Inland Wetlands Commission and Planning & Zoning before the building can start," Giannini said. "We've kind of prepared for a long wait, but the end result will be worth it."

After visiting other shelters, Giannini said it will cost anywhere from \$500,000 to \$600,000 just to meet state requirements.

Giannini has helped establish a non-profit 501-C3 organization named the Happy Tails Foundation to help raise money for the shelter project and to promote the establishment of animal protection programs.

The town formerly leased space at Merryfield **Animal** Hospital on Shepard Avenue to house its strays, but a dispute over a property assessment ended that arrangement.

Since then the town held contracts with North Haven and the District **Animal** Control Office in Woodbridge.

Giannini said she hopes for the **shelter** will be built by summer 2007.

In the meantime, Cahill, Murray and Giannini all want to help get the animals at the North Haven **shelter** adopted.

"It's the dogs that get the bad wrap," Giannini said. "Once you get a dog you have to socialize them and get them around children, other dogs and people in general."

The **animal** control office is open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. For information call 230-4080.