

Op-ed: Truth and Transparency of Utmost Importance at Berkeley Animal Shelter

By Leslie Smith | March 23, 2016

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If you visited Berkeley Animal Care Services (BACS) Sunday, you probably noticed the BPD patrol car in the parking lot. The shelter doesn't normally require police presence, but over the weekend, a threat was made to burn down the building with staff and volunteers tied up inside. The reason: people were outraged by the euthanasia of a big blue dog named Adam. And, in the name of animal advocacy, took action.

Late the previous Friday afternoon, Adam — a dog who had been at BACS since December — sat with two of his very favorite people and devoured part of a pizza and a slice of cake. As the anesthesia eventually took hold and he drifted off, the smell of pepperoni hung in the air; familiar hands scratched behind his ears. It was as smooth a passing as one could wish for any pet.

Still, this was a tough one. Some of the time, Adam was a great dog, beautiful and affectionate. Other times, Adam wasn't so great. He could be mouthy, reactive, and often unpredictable. But a shelter can be a very stressful place for an animal, and BACS gave Adam time to adjust and settle. In fact, they gave him a chance many other facilities might not have.

Ultimately, municipal shelters like BACS are responsible both for providing safe haven to animals whose families can no longer keep them, and for making sure the animals they do adopt out are not a hazard to the community.

You could do worse than to wind up a homeless dog or cat at BACS. Staff and volunteers work side by side, seven days a week training, walking, and offering companionship to the animals there. Every effort is made to find them the best homes possible. With one of the lowest euthanasia rates in the state, BACS lives up to its reputation as a great place to find loving family pets.

Adam, in particular, had a devoted and highly skilled team who adored working with him. He had many stellar moments, but he also continued to reveal some very concerning behaviors. He could be a dog of extremes. And then, several months into his stay at BACS, Adam, unprovoked, bit an experienced handler. For the people who had loved and given so much to this dog, it was a heart-wrenching decision, but it was not a difficult one: the shelter could not safely adopt him out to the public.

As is their usual process, BACS alerted rescue organizations in the area. Any one of them would be welcome to pull Adam — that is, take him into their care — and provide the additional training and resources he would need to become adoptable. BACS would continue to hold and care for him for another week, but keeping him kenneled at the shelter for much longer would have meant a pretty miserable and unacceptable quality of life.

No organization was able to come forward, and on Friday evening Adam died peacefully in the arms of people he loved.

So when staff arrived at the shelter Saturday morning to find fliers plastered around the premises and surrounding neighborhoods, they were stunned. The fliers called Adam's death a travesty and urged residents to voice their disgust to Berkeley officials. A frenzy erupted on social media as "animal advocates" outside the BACS community condemned the cruel actions of the shelter.

For Adam's caregivers and companions, the response is particularly baffling. But taking a step back only serves up more questions. How does such vague rhetoric, short on details but long on accusations, accomplish anything, save inciting a witch hunt? Why not ask for the facts before anonymously maligning the only open-admissions shelter in the city?

And, taking an even farther step back: how can a fractured movement, with neither communication nor cooperation between like-minded groups or individuals, possibly lead to true gains in a struggle as unwieldy as animal welfare?

No institution is infallible, BACS included. Question authority. After all, this is Berkeley. But don't forget to wait for the answers. And when it comes to those fighting the same fight you are, those who show up day after day to do their best for as many as possible, maybe reaching out instead of rushing to condemn is a better tactic? It would seem to make sense to reserve the harshest judgment for those doing nothing at all.

Animal welfare is not an easy gig. Working or volunteering at a city shelter can be incredibly disheartening. It can be soul-crushing. If we are truly to make a difference for the animals we claim to love so much, we have no choice but to face each other. Not from the behind the protection of an anonymous flier, but bravely and civilly, prepared to admit that sometimes there are no comfortable answers.

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