



The Virgin Islands

DAILY NEWS



A Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper

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80th year, No. 22113

A Caribbean problem

Humane Society International
official tours V.I. shelter
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Daily News Photo by SEAN MCCOY

Dogs await adoption at the St. Thomas Humane Society shelter.

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Daily News Photo by SEAN McCOY

Cats await adoption at the St. Thomas Humane Society shelter.

A question of shelter or prevention

By **KAREN HOLLISH** | Daily News Staff

A box of tiny, mewling kittens discarded in a Dumpster. A mother dog and her

unplanned litter of puppies thrown in the bush. An underfunded animal shelter's staff struggling to keep up with the community's continuous supply of unwanted cats and dogs.

Alexandra Rothlisberger, program manager for

Humane Society International's Latin American and Caribbean division, saw all this and more during her visit to St. Thomas and St. John.

See **HUMANE SOCIETY**, next page

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Daily News Photos by SEAN MCCOY

Humane Society of St. Thomas volunteers Danielle Olive, left, and Malik Hunt hold up two dogs available for adoption.

HUMANE SOCIETY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

Humane Society International is a branch of the country's largest animal-protection organization, the Humane Society of the United States.

Rothlisberger came to learn about the territory's animal-welfare issues, assess local programs' strengths and weaknesses and share ideas with residents working in the field. She said she decided to visit the territory after she met Dellia Holodenschi, director of the Humane Society of St. Thomas' Cat Café Program, at a conference held earlier this year.

Soon after her arrival last month from Washington, D.C., Rothlisberger talked to The Daily News about the state of companion animals across the Caribbean. Island nations are struggling with pet overpopulation as consistently more animals are born than there are homes for them, Rothlisberger said.

Many governments, humane organizations and well-meaning individuals think the best way to respond to pet overpopulation is to build a new shelter or improve the one that already exists, Rothlisberger said.



Alexandra Rothlisberger

That is not, however, what Humane Society International recommends. Instead of putting money into a major capital project, communities should invest

those funds into low-cost spay and neuter clinics and community education, Rothlisberger said. Those approaches prevent unwanted litters from being born in the first place, she said.

"What we're seeing on the islands is organizations still have a lack of resources, in terms of finances and personnel," Rothlisberger said. "They're scrambling to do the day-to-day jobs."

Almost all of the territory's companion animal problems — such as dealing with cruelty cases, community cats and abandoned pets — fall on the shoulders of local shelters.

While the V.I. Agriculture Department is charged with these tasks, the department, through an annual allotment from the central government's miscellaneous fund, pays the island's humane organizations to do the vast majority of that work for them.

Sally Nelson, shelter manager for the Animal Care Center of St. John, said the central government's share accounts for less than 10 percent of the organization's budget, and managers from the other shelters

See **HUMANE SOCIETY**, next page

Euthanasia

Figures from 2010

St. Thomas

2,000

Number of animals taken in by the Humane Society of St. Thomas.

1,580

Number euthanized because of sickness, temperament problems or lack of shelter space.

420

Number adopted into new families or returned to their owners

St. Croix

3,600

Number of animals taken in by the St. Croix Animal Welfare Center.

3,000

Number euthanized because of sickness, temperament problems or lack of shelter space.

600

Number adopted into new families or returned to their owners

St. John

62

Number of dogs and cats adopted out of the Animal Care Center of St. John — a mostly no-kill shelter.

6

Number euthanized because of sickness or temperament problems.

— Figures provided by shelter staff. Some numbers are approximate.

Public support for shelters

How much the central government spent on animal shelters in Fiscal Year 2010:

- About \$90,000 for the Humane Society of St. Thomas
- About \$130,000 for the St. Croix Animal Welfare Center
- About \$13,500 for the Animal Care Center of St. John

— Source: V.I. Agriculture Commissioner Louis Petersen Jr., whose department is charged with enforcing the territory's animal welfare regulations and anti-cruelty laws.

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Daily News Photo by SEAN McCOY

Humane Society International representative Alexandra Rothlisberger tours the new Humane Care Campus on St. Thomas.

HUMANE SOCIETY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

have long said that the government funding falls short.

"I know what they have been receiving for the contracts is not sufficient," Agriculture Commissioner Louis Petersen Jr. said, adding that he hopes the amounts can be increased once the territory's fiscal crisis abates.

Local impressions

When Rothlisberger steps off her plane and onto other Caribbean islands, she often is greeted by the sight of hungry-looking stray dogs and cats. She said she noticed right away at King Airport that there are fewer unowned cats and dogs roaming the streets here.

On her second day in the territory, Rothlisberger spent several hours at the Humane Society of St. Thomas shelter in Estate Nadir. She said she was impressed with the formal procedures and policies shelter manager Annabel Hiltz had put into place and that the shelter's outdoor cat enclosures — also known as catteries — are the best way to keep cats healthy and happy while they wait to be adopted.

The euthanasia rates are high, Rothlisberger said, but the staff is working as effectively as they can in the face of limited space, money and time.

Rothlisberger said she noticed the St. Thomas community is sharply divided by the Cat Café Program, in which feral cats are trapped, spayed or neutered and then released back into the area from which they came. Holodenschi, who founded the program, enlists volunteers to provide the

Local resources

Find a new friend, get help spaying or neutering your pet, or volunteer at one of these groups.

Humane Society of St. Thomas

P.O. Box 8150
St. Thomas, VI 00801
775-0599
www.hsstt.com

Animal Care Center of St. John

P.O. Box 429
St. John, VI 00831
774-1625
www.stjohnanimalcarecenter.com

St. Croix Animal Welfare Center

RR 2 No. 32 Clifton Hill
Kingshill, VI 00850
778-1650
www.stcroixawc.org

Spay/Neuter Island Pets

SNIP helps low-income pet owners and those who care for cat colonies afford sterilization surgery for their animals.

cats with food and water.

Rothlisberger talked with some St. Thomians who take issue with this approach and would rather euthanize the cats.

Despite such schisms, which Rothlisberger said are common across communities, the Cat Cafés are serving a good purpose by making people aware of the homeless cats, she said.

"The issue has surfaced, so the community is finally talking about it," Rothlisberger said. "It's getting the community involved."

The Cat Café Program is one of the most innovative ways she has seen a Caribbean community address its feral cat program, Rothlisberger said.

Rothlisberger's visit to St. John was too brief to form a solid opinion of its shelter operations, she said, and she was not able to travel to St. Croix on this trip.

On her last day here, Rothlisberger

visited the new Humane Society of St. Thomas' campus off Weymouth Rhymer Highway and across from Market Square East.

Officials say the long-awaited, nearly \$8 million campus finally will open in July.

While Humane Society International recommends shelters spend their money on spaying and neutering instead of brick-and-mortar buildings, now that the new campus is built, the society should use its classroom facilities to spread awareness of pet overpopulation, Rothlisberger said.

"I see a lot of potential here," Rothlisberger said as she stood in the courtyard of the cutting-edge, nearly 13,000-square-foot campus that will replace the crumbling shelter in Estate Nadir.

"I hope that once they open," she added, "they follow through with education."

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