

CONSIDER

AN UP-CLOSE LOOK AT AMERICAN HUMANE'S PUBLIC POLICY WORK

LEGISLATING HUMANE EUTHANASIA: MYTHS, FACTS AND A CALL FOR ASSISTANCE

By Tracy Coppola, legislative analyst, American Humane's Office of Public Policy

Every year, an estimated 3 to 4 million cats and dogs are euthanized in U.S. animal shelters. For anyone who cherishes companion animals, this tragic fact is made even more unbearable by the knowledge that inhumane methods — namely carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide — are still used as a primary means of euthanasia in some of the nation's shelters.

Working on humane euthanasia legislation is difficult, yet needed, at a time when gas chambers are still far too prevalent. As we seek to find solutions for pet overpopulation and to eliminate the need for euthanasia of healthy and adoptable animals, one of the main priorities of American Humane's Office of Public Policy is to work for legislation that will ensure every shelter animal facing euthanasia is provided a humane death, while giving all shelter professionals the dignity they deserve when facing the difficult reality of having to euthanize unadoptable and/or unhealthy pets.

American Humane believes euthanasia by injection (EBI) is the most humane method of euthanizing shelter animals. This year we celebrated the landmark passage of New Mexico's EBI bill (House Bill 265), while we continue to strongly advocate for passage of EBI bills in Illinois (Senate Bill 38), New York (Assembly Bill 999/SB 4962) and Pennsylvania (SB 672). American Humane also drafted and filed bills this year in North Carolina (HB 6/SB 199, "Davies Law") and in Michigan (HB 4263).

MYTH vs. FACT

Despite support from the general public, most EBI bills face several challenges and surprising opposition. In order to advocate on these bills, American Humane needs the help of animal welfare professionals like you. Understanding some of the common arguments against these bills, and our counter-arguments, will help you aid us in our efforts.

MYTH: EUTHANIZING SHELTER ANIMALS WITH GAS IS SAFE FOR HUMANS.

FACT: American Humane's many years of direct involvement in training shelter euthanasia technicians on properly administering EBI has definitively shown that EBI is the safest method. Carbon monoxide poses a danger to humans because it is colorless, tasteless, odorless and highly explosive. A gas chamber must be constantly checked and maintained to ensure no cracks exist in the structure. When carbon dioxide is released in a confined area, it can cause asphyxiation, kidney damage or induced coma. There are no documented reports of any shelter worker being killed from accidental injection, yet there are reports of shelter workers and veterinarians being injured or killed from gas.

MYTH: EUTHANIZING SHELTER ANIMALS WITH GAS IS HUMANE FOR THE ANIMAL.

FACT: If successful, the gas chamber can take up to 25 minutes to end an animal's life. EBI causes loss of consciousness within three to five seconds and death within five minutes. The American Veterinary Medical Association states that carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide are suitable only for most small species. However, old, neonatal and injured animals are often

biologically unable to absorb the gas as readily as larger or healthier animals, resulting in prolonged trauma and stress. Furthermore, animals don't always die in gas chambers, as documented by the fact that a dog survived the St. Louis, Mo., Animal Regulation Center's gas chamber in 2003, and a puppy survived the Davie County, N.C., Animal Shelter's gas chamber in 2005.

MYTH: THE GAS CHAMBER NEEDS TO BE USED FOR AGGRESSIVE AND WILD ANIMALS.

FACT: It is much safer to sedate and then inject an aggressive animal rather than drag a frantic animal into a gas chamber. Many common restraint methods exist that do not require shelter workers to handle the animal themselves if the animal is deemed dangerous. Shelter workers can then anesthetize the restrained animal with an intramuscular injection of pre-euthanasia drugs, followed by sodium pentobarbital once the animal is unconscious. If restraint methods are not available, shelter workers can give aggressive animals sodium pentobarbital by mouth by mixing its powder form (called Fatal Plus) with canned food or by squirting it into the animal's mouth. Once the animal is unconscious, they can administer a lethal dose of the drug.

MYTH: SHELTER WORKERS PREFER TO USE GAS CHAMBERS.

FACT: American Humane knows firsthand that most shelter workers wish to hold and comfort a frightened animal in its final moments of life. That act may be the only kindness the animal has ever known. In contrast, the gas chamber is both inhumane and demoralizing to the emotional and physical health of human beings and animals.

MYTH: THE GAS CHAMBER IS CHEAPER THAN EBI.

FACT: American Humane recently commissioned a cost analysis study that shows EBI is the cheaper option. Using data from an animal shelter in North Carolina, the number of dogs and cats euthanized in 2007 was 5,427. The study shows that the cost to use carbon monoxide gas is \$4.98 per animal. The cost to use carbon monoxide poisoning without a tranquilizer is \$4.66 per animal. The cost to use EBI, however, was only \$2.29 per animal. ■

CALL FOR ASSISTANCE

EBI legislation cannot be successful without the support of shelter workers and volunteers, veterinarians and communities. As we continue to wage our campaign to promote humane euthanasia, American Humane's Office of Public Policy would like to hear from euthanasia technicians and veterinarians who can attest to EBI as being the humane alternative to gas. Please contact us at publicpolicy@americanhumane.org if you would like to share your professional insight. Doing so will go a long way toward successfully legislating EBI.

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