

Pamela Burns

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The Hawaiian Humane Society president is working to create a humane society in its broadest sense

By Mark Coleman



Pamela Burns, president of the Hawaiian Humane Society, says you don't have to believe in animal rights to care about animal welfare.

Not only is there the desire to prevent "needless suffering," she said this week, but also, "Animal abuse is directly related to human violence. So if you see an animal being abused in the home, it's very much of a red flag to look at other vulnerable groups in that home that also could be being abused."

Addressing domestic violence, in fact, was very much a part of the original mission of the society, which was founded by Helen Kinau Wilder in 1883.

"We really were established to create a humane society in its broadest sense, to protect those that are most vulnerable in our community, be they animals, children, unwed mothers or people with mental illnesses," she explained. "Then, in the mid-1930s, it was decided that our work for the protection of children needed to become its own, independent effort, so we were really the forerunner for Child & Family Services."

Burns is a frequent name in the news because of issues such as puppy mills, dogfighting, cockfighting, invasive species such as pigs and coqui frogs or animals that sometimes annoy, such as peacocks and roosters.

"Animals bring out the passion and polarization of people, and we're often right in there in that mix because we're often just as much about people as we are about animals," she said.

Burns emphasized that the society, based in Moiliili, is not affiliated with the Humane Society of the United States, which was established in 1954 to address animal welfare issues at the national level.

"We work with them on legislative issues, but they are really not involved with local sheltering issues, homeless animals, that kind of thing," she said.

Shortly after joining the local society, Burns learned that her great-grandfather, J.S. Walker, who had been finance director for King David Kalakaua, had been the society's first president.

"It was after I was hired, and I had no idea," she said. "Also, my grandmother (Una Walker) was on the board here for many years when I was growing up, but she didn't know either."

Born on Hawaii island, Burns was raised mostly on Oahu, in Waipahu, where her father was manager of Oahu Sugar Co. and her family had "a huge array of cats and dogs and a horse." She attended Punahou School, then an equine-related boarding high school in Virginia — Chatham Hall. After obtaining bachelor's degrees in art and social work from Whittier College in California, she returned to Hawaii and worked for HMSA, then Straub Hospital. It was at Straub, while in her late 30s, where she thought about "what made my heart sing."

"I thought about animals and ... anybody who knew me said, 'Oh, absolutely right for you, Pam.' So ... I was fortunate enough to be hired in 1990 as the president here."

Burns, 60, lives on Tantalus with her cats Umi a Liloa and Pilikia and dog Daisy.

Question: Is the Hawaiian Humane Society promoting any legislation this year?

Answer: Yes, we are. We have several bills that will be introduced this legislative session. We are working with, as we have in the past, Sen. Clayton Hee's office — he's been a strong animal advocate — as well as with others.

Last year we worked very hard to have a large-scale dog-breeding bill introduced, (which would allow welfare inspections and ensure standards of care for dogs that are bred for profit) ... and we're hoping that that bill is going to be resurrected this year.

As a fallback position, we have also worked with Sen. Hee's office to incorporate enhanced standards of care for dogs in facilities or households where there are more than 10 dogs over the age of 4 months, which is what a household on Oahu is allowed to legally have.

Another legislative bill that we're working on this year is, as we learned from the forfeiture hearing last year, trying to enhance the civil forfeiture process so it can include restitution for legal fees in the event of a puppy mill case like we had. The current forfeiture law does not allow for that.

And also to include in the forfeiture law horses, which are not in there now. There's a big case on Kauai — 12 horses, I think, were rescued. But because horses weren't in the forfeiture law, they (the Kauai Humane Society) were not able to go in and make that action.

Finally, for the forfeiture law, is to include in there animals' offspring. Because in last year's puppy mill case that we had — 153 dogs (seized from a puppy mill in Waimanalo) and subsequently 79 puppies — there was some question about whether the puppies would be considered part of the forfeiture hearing or not ...

We've done a lot of work with the Legislature in the last 10 years, from creating felony animal-cruelty laws to including animals in temporary restraining orders in domestic violence situations. We were critical in getting the quarantine laws changed many years ago. So we really think the Legislature is a very important way of increasing the protection of animals.

Q: How is all this animal protection paid for?

A: We have a contract with the City and County of Honolulu to provide animal care and control services. The scope of work ranges from enforcement of the animal-related laws — like licensing, cat identification, and animal cruelty — to the sheltering of animals.

However, it is a lump-sum contract, so what that means is you negotiate a scope of work for a certain amount of money, and that's it, regardless of whether it costs more than what you are paid for. For example, with the puppy mill case, our expenses were extraordinary, if you can imagine, caring for 153 dogs and 79 puppies. Those are costs that are going to be needed to be covered by our charity money.

Q: I saw on the Humane Society website that that case has cost more than \$400,000?

A: Yeah, and that's a lot of money. It not only covered the actual direct cost of the care of the dogs — we had to outsource a lot of the veterinary services due to the condition of the dogs — but it also included the cost of our staff time, the boarding and food and care that was provided, as well as the needed attorney we had to hire in order to represent us in the civil forfeiture hearing.

Q: So the lump sum you get right now is something like \$2.3 million a year?

A: Yes, \$2.3 million for an animal care and control contract. It sounds like a lot of money, but just to give an idea about that, we are needing to address the population of 975,000 people that live on this island. And when you look at it on a per capita basis, it's almost like \$2 per person, whereas what's recommended for a really good program is

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somewhere about \$4 per person. On the neighbor islands they are receiving between \$9 and \$11 per person for the animal contract.

Q: Does the society have a similar enforcement relationship with the state?

A: How it kind of works is the state laws get rolled down to the county ordinances. So, say you have a state animal-cruelty law. The county incorporates that into the ordinance, and then the contract we have with the city is to enforce those laws, which are then both state and county laws.

Q: Where does the bulk of the society's annual budget of \$6.5 million come from?

A: The animal control contract for the scope of work that I mentioned before, and then also from charity — 60 percent from people writing out checks and supporting the work we do with animal welfare, promoting the human-animal bond.

Q: You have 75 employees and 700 volunteers at the Oahu society. What do the employees mostly do?

A: They include our field services staff of 10. We have five people in the admissions department; we have five staff members in the adoptions area; we have about 15 animal care professionals; we have two full-time veterinarians and some volunteer veterinarians; we have about a half a dozen people in our advocacy and community relations department, with our outreach programs, foster care programs and volunteer programs in that area. ...

Q: What do the volunteers do mostly?

A: Oh, blessed the volunteers. They come and they walk dogs, they work in the clinic, they help with adoptions, work on special events. About 60 teams of volunteers and their pets visit many hospitals and hospice programs. And we also have about 500 volunteers in our foster care program.

Q: You can take care of an animal for a little while, like a foster child?

A: Oh yeah, depending on what the need is. Sometimes we have our foster program for deployed military. We also foster for space sometimes.

Q: Space?

A: We get inundated. We have too many animals that are available for adoption and we have more coming through the door that are perfectly healthy animals, so we make a call to foster volunteers who can then foster a cat or a dog for a couple of weeks until there's more room in the kennels.

We have not euthanized for space in several years. If we're feeling like we're up to the top of the glass, full, we start fostering out for space until we can get more space.

Q: What kinds of legal powers does the society have?

A: Our humane investigators are authorized by the Honolulu Police Department to enforce certain animal-related laws, which include — certainly the one we're most passionate about — animal cruelty and neglect. Also, dog licensing, stray dogs, cat ID and some other animal issues; barking dogs, for example. However, we're not authorized to enforce all the animal-related laws — say, for example, dogs that are in the lap of a driver.

Q: You have 10 trucks now that collect strays?

A: Yes, and we have about three officers on duty at any given time. And that's to cover the whole island. We get 16,000 requests from the public a year — A to Z, as you can imagine, from barking dogs to loose dogs to stray dogs to rescues, emergencies, inspections ...

Q: Trends in pet ownership — do you have an impressions about that?

A: It's all over the map. We may have more information when we do another Ward Research project in the next year or so, but one of the things that's really interesting is that dog ownership increased from 20 percent of households on Oahu in 1993 to 43 percent in 2008. So it's doubled in last 20 years.

What's interesting to see, too, is that cat ownership has remained essentially flat. On the island of Oahu, 19 percent of households have a cat and 17 percent feed cats that they don't consider part of their household. So one of most significant animal issues that we are facing is the cat overpopulation in Hawaii.

For us, the largest reason for euthanasia here is because of feral cats. Euthanasia is not a solution. However, the thousands of feral cats that we get in here are not appropriate for adoption in somebody's home. They would be completely freaked out. So the more people we can get to help with sterilizing stray cats would really help in reducing the number of homeless cats we receive.

Q: Do you think there are enough homes for all the stray animals in town?

A: Well, we sure would wish that everybody would come here to adopt an animal. That's one of our biggest challenges. We're the only open-door shelter. We accept animals 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And that means we don't turn any animal away. We would love to see more shelters where animals could go and hopefully then find a permanent home eventually.

In fact, with the growing population in West Oahu, we are very much looking at possibly opening a satellite facility in West Oahu. But since we're already doing so much with limited resources, it's really going to need to be fueled by major support from folks in the community who share a commitment to have a facility out in West Oahu, with its growing human and, along with it, animal population.

Q: The society's website says you're able to get adopted about 7,000 cats and dogs a year. How many are you unable to place and have to put to sleep?

A: Far too many. When it comes to cats, the No. 1 reason that cats are euthanized is because they are feral and unsocialized and are not successful adoption candidates. For dogs, it's primarily that they are older and have a behavioral problem, like aggression, or a medical problem that's been longstanding, that people actually surrendered the animal to us to be euthanized.

For animals that pass our health and screening, that they're basically healthy and of basic good temperament, all of those animals get adopted out. Our goal is to get as many animals adopted as possible.

Our fee is \$65 for a cat or a dog, and those are animals that are sterilized and microchipped and treated for worms and all that.

We also do a lot of promotionals, like "Free after 3 years old," or "Senior animals for senior people," or we had doggie speed dating in February. We're trying to think of creative ways.