

BY BRENDA FOWLER

An activist banker named Paula Fasseas is pushing the city's *animal welfare groups* (which euthanize tens of thousands of strays and unwanted animals each year) to join her in making Chicago a so-called no-kill city. But her aggressive tactics have angered some leaders, and the feud has reached all the way to City Hall

Like Cats and Dogs



IN AN ALLEY OUTSIDE THE BACK DOOR of a taco shop in Chicago's Little Village, a skinny mutt begs for a few morsels, teats rocking heavily beneath her. Somewhere close by on this cold, rainy evening, a nest of hungry, damp puppies must be anxiously awaiting her return.

Even if this mother could manage to make a living off the streets, she and her puppies probably are not long for this world. Sooner or later, someone will report the newborns to the city pound, known in Chicago as Animal Care and Control, and in a day or two a little van will come and take them to the facility at 27th Street and Western. The mother may well be picked up a few days later. If no one claims her in five days, the period required for holding strays, chances are she will be injected with a lethal dose of sodium pentobarbital. And the puppies? Already dead. They would have been euthanized when they came in, since, with some exceptions, the pound generally chooses not to handle animals younger than eight weeks.

In 2001, more than 33,000 animals were put to death in Chicago, many because there was simply no room for them in the city's shelter system. While the

figure has dropped markedly, from 42,600 in 1997, the killing of healthy animals weighs heavily on the consciences of a growing number of people—among them, a Chicago bank executive named Paula Fasseas.

In 1997, Fasseas founded an animal welfare organization called PAWS Chicago (Pets Are Worth Saving), and in the past few years she and her supporters have campaigned aggressively to promote efforts to sterilize animals—their solution to the city's overpopulation of

▲ "Isn't he glad I'm involved?" asks Paula Fasseas (right), who has clashed with the Anti-Cruelty Society's Gene Mueller (left).

REPORTER

unwanted dogs and cats. “I used to think because I didn’t see animals in the streets that we didn’t have animals out in the streets,” says Fasseas, who lives in the Gold Coast.

In many parts of the city, especially low-income areas of the South and West Sides, stray animals and dumped pets breed with abandon. “We have packs of wild dogs roaming the neighborhood, terrorizing the kids,” says 12th Ward alderman Ray Frias. Early this year, stray dogs mauled two joggers as they ran through the Dan Ryan Woods on the city’s South Side, killing one woman.

In November of 2000, PAWS opened the Lurie Family Spay/Neuter Clinic on West 26th Street in Little Village, near the border of the 12th Ward. Carved out of space donated by one of Fasseas’s banks, the low-cost clinic is one of only a few in the country serving primarily a low-income population. It performed 4,200 procedures in its first year, and 5,890 in 2002, about a quarter of them free for the pets of people on public assistance.

“What Paula has done with that clinic is fascinating,” says Ledy VanKavage, a Springfield-based lobbyist for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. “It’s saving numerous lives. I can’t say enough good things about her.”

Fasseas sees the Little Village clinic as the first big piece in her vision for Chicago. Over the next five or six years, she would like to have Chicago join San Francisco as a “no-kill” city—the slightly misleading term describing places that work to find a home for every adoptable animal (even in San Francisco, animals that cannot be rehabilitated are euthanized). Already she has built a base of dedicated volunteers who are motivated by the no-kill goal and rallied Chicago’s many small no-kill shelters around the idea of applying for millions of dollars in grant money to help them increase adoptions and carry out low-cost sterilizations.

But Fasseas’s no-kill campaign, with its unrelenting emphasis on the overall number of animals euthanized, has also ignited a conflict within the ranks of the city’s animal welfare advocates. In particular, she has irritated Gene Mueller, a veterinarian who directs the city’s oldest, richest, and most powerful advocacy group, the Anti-Cruelty Society, which in 2002 euthanized more than 8,000 animals. Last March, he sent an indignant

letter to Mayor Richard M. Daley, accusing PAWS of maligning Chicago and the work of local animal shelters. “It’s not honest,” Mueller says of the no-kill movement. “The question isn’t the 32,000 animals or so that are euthanized; the question is the 10,000 or so [of that group] that are adoptable and the thousands beyond that that are rehabilitatable. Does it need to be inflamed beyond that? You’ve set up a situation where people are misperceiving what the goal really is.”

The rise of PAWS—and the feud it has set off—stands as a case study of the passions generated by the growing interest in the rights of animals. And animal welfare advocates in Chicago worry that unless Fasseas and Mueller can mend their rift and combine their formidable energies, the city could miss out on the chance to solve a real problem.

A TRIM, PRETTY BLONDE, PAULA FASSEAS, 47, talks fast, as if she’s got only so much time to make her pitch. She grew up in Tucson, Arizona, where, she says, despite having a loving Greek American family, “the best part of my childhood was still my dogs.” She arrived in Chicago with her husband, Peter, in 1975, and together they founded the Metropolitan Bank Group, which now includes seven banks, including North Community and Archer. Today she is vice-chairman (in 1996 she received an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago). Her involvement in animal welfare, she says, started in 1997 when her daughter came home from volunteering at the Anti-Cruelty Society, upset that animals had been taken from the adoption room to be euthanized. “If you don’t help them, Mom, who is going to?” Fasseas recalls her daughter asking.

The animal welfare services that she set out to reform in Chicago are dominated by three large shelters: Animal Care and Control, the city pound, which is commissioned to pick up strays off the street, and two humane societies, the Animal Welfare League, on the city’s Far South Side, and the Anti-Cruelty Society, located downtown. In 2001 these three shelters together reported taking in more than 46,251 animals—a crushing volume of strays, abandoned animals, and unwanted pets dropped off by owners. The total included cats and dogs, kittens and puppies, but also “nuisance” animals like raccoons and skunks, and exotics like

birds and snakes. Of those, 8,983 cats and dogs were saved through adoption, about 5,300 from the Anti-Cruelty Society alone, and several hundred more were reunited with their owners or transferred to other shelters for a second chance at adoption. But the majority—33,098—were euthanized. Some were dear old pets put to sleep at the request of their owners; some were fatally ill or so badly injured that euthanasia seemed the only humane thing to do; and some were so wild or vicious that they were unfit to be around people. But others simply lacked training; were sick, injured, very young or getting old; or were perfectly healthy animals for which there simply wasn’t enough space. These are the animals that no-kill proponents like Fasseas say deserve to be saved.

No-kill shelters first arose in the 1960s as a response to the killing of healthy animals by traditional humane societies. Because many were not able to find homes for all those they took in, no-kill shelters sometimes ended up warehousing animals for years, a result that some animal rights advocates said was no better than death. By the early 1990s, no-kill shelters had begun to organize themselves locally and nationally and to refine their definitions: “Adoptable” animals were those healthy enough to be adopted right away while “treatable” or “rehabilitatable” animals were those that first needed to be healed or trained before they could be adopted. Animals that couldn’t be healed or trained were classified as “non-rehabilitatable.”

The no-kill movement scored its first big triumph in San Francisco in 1994, when the city pound signed a historic pact with the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals pledging that no “adoptable” dog or cat in San Francisco would be euthanized. Under the tenure of Richard Avanzino, the former head of the San Francisco SPCA who is considered a guru in the no-kill movement, homes were found for all the “adoptables” and the vast majority of “treatables” were treated and then adopted. Through these aggressive adoption efforts, and a concerted sterilization push, the city has now achieved the lowest euthanasia rate in the country—just three per 1,000 human inhabitants, compared with just under 12 per 1,000 in Chicago. Since then, cities like Richmond, Virginia, and Austin, Texas, and the entire states of New

Hampshire and Utah either have gone no-kill or are moving in that direction. Fasseas is determined to make it happen in Chicago, too.

LATE ONE RECENT AFTERNOON, NEARLY every chair in the waiting room of the 26th Street PAWS clinic is taken, and Fasseas steps over leash lines and around sleeping dogs to chat with the clients. Linnea Fernandez, who lives at West 44th Street and South Honore, in the Back-of-the-Yards neighborhood, has come to retrieve Tigere, the eight-month-old kitten she dropped off this morning to be neutered. “I found him in the street when he was little,” says Fernandez, who is here with her two children. “We have so many cats in our neighborhood, so their father finally gave in and let them have one.”

On the city’s North Side, where veterinarians are plentiful, the operation costs at least \$120, but here it’s \$40, including a distemper vaccination—or free, if you can demonstrate that you are on public assistance or are lucky enough to have a voucher, like the one Fernandez got at a local PAWS event. The clinic earns only about \$200,000 of its \$550,000 operating budget from fees for services; PAWS makes up the balance, as well as the \$300,000 it spends on adoptions, humane education, and administrative costs, solely through donations and grants.

Fasseas points to a poster that graphically illustrates the mind-boggling statistics on feline fertility: In seven years, one female cat and her offspring can produce 420,715 more cats.

“Unfortunately, our community is not well versed in the responsibility of caring for pets,” Alderman Frias says. “Often-times they let them roam, and by roaming around [the animals] go procreate—because they have not taken the appropriate steps to have them spayed or neutered because it’s expensive.”

That’s why Fasseas, after discussions with other shelters in the city, decided to establish the spay-neuter clinic here. “If you look at the 15 wards with the largest number of strays or number of animals dropped off or picked up, it’s disproportionately the really poor wards,” says Mark Duggan, an assistant professor of economics at the University of Chicago who is on the board of PAWS. Duggan says the declining number of animals im-

pounded every year in Chicago—down by about 11 percent since 1997—is due largely to the steady increase in sterilizations over the past two decades. But if the number of killings is to drop substantially, he says, the programs need to target areas with the biggest problems, especially the South and West Sides of the city.

From the PAWS waiting room, Fasseas opens a door and passes by two spotless examination rooms into the recovery area, where a dozen cats slowly emerging from anesthesia are draped, limp, across a warming blanket as a technician moves from one to the next cleaning out their ears. From a cage in the recovery room next door, a dog barks, the others join in, and soon the whole room is ringing with percussive howls and yelps. “Ooooooh, who’s crying, who’s crying?” Fasseas whimpers, doubling back when she hears a particularly mournful moan. A tawny pit bull with a chewed-up ear stares out pleadingly from his cage. “I wouldn’t put my fingers in there,” she cautions.

EVEN BEFORE OFFICIALLY FOUNDING PAWS, Fasseas had started turning Chicago’s entrenched animal adoption process on its head. Instead of waiting for people to come to the shelters, she took the dogs and cats out to where the people were—to Barney’s and Bloomingdale’s downtown, and later to Old Orchard Center in Skokie, to the Petco stores on the North Side and in Orland Park, and into the lobbies of North Community Banks. Since starting the program, known as “Angels with Tails,” and then opening the PAWS Chicago Cat Adoption Center at 2337 North Clark Street in Lincoln Park, PAWS has found homes for 2,081 cats and dogs and facilitated hundreds more adoptions by no-kill shelters.

Fasseas says she now is looking for a site to open a dog adoption center, since the clinic does not shelter more than a handful of adoptable dogs at any one time, and they are generally available to people only at PAWS adoption events (though people can see them on the Web site). People who call up PAWS wanting to give their dog (or a stray) to a no-kill shelter are told that PAWS will work with them to find a home for the animal, but typically cannot shelter the animal.

Fasseas says she and her husband have “used up every political favor we’ve ever

known” to get PAWS up and running. Through one connection she got a picture of Sammy Sosa posing with a gray kitty for a spay-neuter flyer in Spanish and English; through another, she got Juanita Jordan to serve as honorary chairwoman for the Fur Ball, a PAWS benefit held last November at the Escada boutique on Michigan Avenue. A fortuitous encounter at a cocktail party resulted in slick publicity material designed by Ogilvy & Mather.

Many of the animals PAWS puts up for adoption come from Animal Care and Control, where between 25 and 30 percent of those euthanized are potentially adoptable, says Nikki Garbis Proutsos, the executive director, who has high praise for Fasseas’s efforts. At the Animal Welfare League, which has also given animals to PAWS, perhaps 12 to 15 percent of animals euthanized are adoptable, according to Linda Estrada, president.

At the Anti-Cruelty Society, the story is a bit different. Of the 8,142 animals euthanized there in the year ending last October 31st, 2,917 were killed at the request of the owner, and 5,225 were killed at the discretion of the society. Of the latter, 518 were euthanized because they were too young, 2,109 because of poor health, 941 because of poor physical condition, and 1,511 because of bad temperament, according to statistics the society provided. More than 100 were euthanized because they were pit bulls or difficult-to-handle exotics, like chinchillas, that the Anti-Cruelty Society rarely puts up for adoption. Just 32 of those euthanized were defined by the society as “adoptable” and killed only because there was no longer space for them, says Gene Mueller, the society’s director. Mueller readily acknowledges that many of those euthanized—dogs with kennel cough or cats with upper respiratory infection—could be easily treated if there were endless space in the society’s isolation ward.

A stocky man with a guarded smile, no-nonsense eyes, and a reputation for being outspoken, Mueller, 42, trained as a veterinarian and epidemiologist. In 1997, when Mueller was working as the director of environmental health in the city’s Department of Public Health, the mayor asked him to take over as head of the city pound. There he was credited with beginning to turn around a badly

underfunded and mismanaged system. Among other things, he increased adoptions by more than 40 percent, in part by giving animals to Fasseas for PAWS events. But in 1999, after serving the mayor for just under 19 months, Mueller left to become president of the Anti-Cruelty Society.

AT LEAST FOR THOSE ANIMALS WHO MAKE it into the adoption rooms, the Anti-Cruelty Society is a relatively happy place. The cages are cleaned as soon as the animal has made a mess, and volunteers stream in all day long to cuddle and play with the dogs and cats. The society's location downtown—it occupies an entire block along West Grand Avenue between LaSalle Drive and Wells Street in a neighborhood of increasingly upscale shops and million-dollar condos—makes it highly visible to the public. The society's annual report for 2001, which was mailed out to an astounding 195,000 supporters, lists the names of 3,000 donors who gave \$100 or more, including one whose estate gave \$1 million.

Despite the society's obvious successes, Fasseas has long suggested to Mueller and his predecessor, Jane Stern, that the society should take the moral high road by publicly addressing euthanasia. The experience of San Francisco, and her own business instincts, have convinced Fasseas that if the public knew the anguishing statistics, they would be motivated to spay and neuter their animals and to get their pets not from puppy mills and pet shops but from shelters. (According to Duggan, the economist, only 8 to 12 percent of the pets in Chicago are obtained through shelters.) In all her public comments and in all the PAWS literature, Fasseas talks about euthanasia. And that's where she and Mueller first clashed.

In August 2001, at a bill-signing for Illinois's new humane euthanasia law, Mueller confronted Fasseas about using what he called "rhetoric" in emphasizing the euthanasia totals when they both knew *some* animals in Chicago would always have to be euthanized. Fasseas says she disagreed with his description of her approach. Then, in March, Mueller wrote the letter to Mayor Daley, accusing PAWS of hurting Chicago's animal welfare system by stating on a "national" Web site (petfinders.org) that the city was "one of the most inhumane" in the country. He also said the claim on

PAWS' own Web site that Chicago had "one of the highest killing rates in the United States" was "factually wrong."

"It unfairly and inaccurately criticizes the very agency, Chicago Animal Care and Control, that as a Commission member [Fasseas] should be committed to support and champion for," Mueller wrote, referring to Fasseas's position on the pound's advisory board, for which, paradoxically, he had nominated her.

Mueller now refers to the PAWS Web site's claims as "development hyperbole." "My loyalty to the mayor and to the city is unwavering," he says. "And [those claims] did not put the city in a favorable light."

He points out that the Web site content was changed soon after he wrote the letter, and that was "the end of the issue."

Perhaps not quite. While Fasseas acknowledges that the PAWS Web site should have been updated to reflect Chicago's improved euthanasia rates, she also questions why Mueller hadn't protested the same claims earlier, when he was director of the city pound. In April she sent a response to the mayor suggesting that Mueller might have criticized PAWS because it was competing against Anti-Cruelty for donor dollars.

"Isn't [Mueller] glad I'm involved helping animals?" she asks. "I mean, I'd like to see ten like me involved, doing what we're doing."

MUELLER'S DENUNCIATION HAS SPURRED Fasseas to speak even more frankly about how she thinks the Anti-Cruelty Society, with its comfortable endowment of nearly \$16 million, 325 active volunteers, and political clout, could help lead in turning Chicago into a no-kill city. Hers are no small suggestions. She says that Anti-Cruelty should counsel owners who want to relinquish their pets about what may happen to the animals if no home can be found, and work with them to find another solution. She says Anti-Cruelty should also stop euthanizing animals and transfer the strays it receives to Animal Care and Control, which would become the clearinghouse for all animals. Animal Care and Control would continue to euthanize those that could not be rehabilitated, but Anti-Cruelty, PAWS, and the small no-kill shelters would take all the adoptable animals and find homes for them. Once that system

was up and running, the shelters could then devote more resources to treatment and rehabilitation. That way, she says, a place that calls itself a "humane society" would not be involved in killing. In the meantime, Anti-Cruelty should give PAWS or some other no-kill shelter all the adoptable animals that they cannot place.

"You are what you do the most of," says Fasseas. "Your reputation and the trust the community has in you are nullified when you're euthanizing animals."

Mueller curtly ticks off a list of the Anti-Cruelty Society's programs and recent accomplishments. It picks up animals surrendered by owners and investigates cases of animal abuse. In its new \$6.7-million auditorium and dog training facility, adjacent to the clinic and adoption center, the society annually presents humane education programs for thousands of Chicago schoolchildren and runs evening classes for pet owners. Mueller is especially proud of his new initiative to end dogfighting in Chicago and the fact that the society last year transferred 1,000 animals from the city pound in an effort to get them adopted. In 2002, total adoptions numbered 5,764, up slightly over the previous five years.

Again citing the geographic distribution of the stray animal problem, Fasseas says she cannot understand why Anti-Cruelty spent millions on the education and dog training facility downtown when it could have used the money to open a spay-neuter clinic in a low-income area, expand its isolation rooms, or create bigger cages in its adoption room.

Mueller defends the work as well as the location of the Anti-Cruelty clinic, which since 1990 has sterilized some 75,000 animals, including about 7,000 last year. The majority of those operations—about 5,000—were done on pets adopted out, which is required by law. Fewer than 2,000 were on those brought in for that purpose by the public, and Mueller says the society has not analyzed the addresses of those people to know where in the city they live.

"You can't just measure [the success of the program] by the number of surgeries but instead by how likely are the animals that are coming in to be out and loose," says Duggan. "If all the surgeries are coming from yuppies in the Gold Coast and Lincoln Park, coming down

REPORTER

to save \$50, it's not going to have a very big impact."

Moreover, while the cost to sterilize an animal at the Anti-Cruelty Society's clinic is just \$25, or free for those on public assistance or disability, callers seeking appointments this past November could not get in until February, and a recorded message said no appointments were being made for female dogs. Mueller pointedly declined to say whether the Anti-Cruelty Society had plans to expand its veterinary services beyond the River North location. He noted that a van the society formerly took out to low-income areas during the summer months, offering free vaccinations and vouchers for sterilization downtown, had caught fire last year, and they haven't replaced it.

"If you'd like to give me the \$120,000 to buy that [new] van, I would actually consider doing that," Mueller says. And as for Fasseas, he responds: "I appreciate her opinion about what we should or should not be doing, but that's all."

There are signs, however, that Fasseas's ideas have started to change some of the thinking at Chicago's largest animal welfare agencies. Although Anti-Cruelty's Web site does not mention that animals are killed there, last spring for the first time the society's annual report published statistics on animals euthanized. And in January, Mueller said Anti-Cruelty had agreed to take part in the "big fix," a new

initiative by Animal Care and Control that offers one free day of sterilizations a month for the pets of people who live in wards designated as target areas. Clinics at the Animal Welfare League and Animal Care and Control will do at least 25 surgeries each on the free days, says Garbis Proutsos. Meanwhile, the Anti-Cruelty Society will work about 50 such surgeries into its schedule each month.

"Anti-Cruelty has performed and continues to perform," says one animal welfare advocate who has worked in the field for decades. "But are they thinking forward, taking aggressive steps to end animal overpopulation and senseless euthanization? Maybe not."

Mueller and members of his board of directors say they are guided by the longstanding tradition of the 104-year-old Anti-Cruelty Society to accept all animals that arrive at their doorstep. Alvin Shapiro, the society's board chairman, says they discussed the "no-kill" model several years ago, and rejected it.

Still, Mueller says, he would like to be invited to take part in the coalition of small no-kills that Fasseas has organized to discuss animal welfare issues, including the possibility of applying for a grant from Maddie's Fund, a California-based philanthropy that supports organizations in cities that could plausibly become no-kill within five years. Before they can even apply, Fasseas says, the no-kill shelters will have to

increase their adoptions by around 30 percent over the next three years, a daunting task given the shrinking economy. Then they must develop a business plan to demonstrate how they will continue to increase adoptions and expand spay-neuter services. The incentive, however, is huge. If Chicago shelters can come together on a collaborative proposal, they could be awarded in excess of \$10 million over several years, according to Richard Avanzino, the man who revolutionized the San Francisco SPCA and now heads Maddie's Fund.

"The whole idea is to get some business acumen associated with the passion in saving lives," says Avanzino.

But Shapiro, the Anti-Cruelty's board chairman, said that while he could see buying another van or even two to pitch in with the sterilization programs around the city, he doesn't think money from Maddie's Fund is the answer.

"An extra million dollars . . . I don't know what we would do with it," Shapiro says. "Would we try to send the dogs and cats to psychiatrists to figure out their aggression?"

In Fasseas's mind, there simply are no limits to what can be done for animals. With enough time and resources, she says, even some of those with bad tempers *can* be rehabilitated. "I really think the [animal overpopulation problem] is solvable," she says. "I wouldn't want to contribute to something that isn't solution-based." ■