

Whitfield County Animal Shelter repurposes old mobile home into a special facility known as a cattery, giving felines a place their own

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Diane Franklin focused intently on the tiny black kitten, born just a few days earlier, as she used a syringe to feed it sugar water, then milk in an effort to save its life.

Sucking on the syringe just a few minutes, the kitten already seemed to be bouncing back, stretching out its tiny paw seemingly in a show of appreciation for the attention from the Whitfield County Animal Shelter director.

Veterinarian Dr. Emily Felker had come by a few minutes earlier to check on the runt from a litter of five, telling Franklin she thought it still had a chance to survive with the proper care.

“This kitten is just about dehydrated and just about brain dead because of lack of food,” Felker said. “So what you’ve got to do is get its blood sugar up. It’ll be dead by the end of the day unless someone intervenes with nursing care ... not medical care ... nursing care. Can’t wait too long, though...”

“Well, I’ll be the nurse,” chimed in Tammy Cantrell, an assistant at the animal shelter, where the kittens were brought a few days earlier. “I can do it.”

“That’s the right attitude,” Felker answered.



All this activity was going on in a nondescript mobile home (one of three donated to the county by the Whitfield County School System, with the other two being used by Public Works for a training room and a break room for paving) behind the animal shelter that offers few clues to passersby of the life-saving mission behind its doors. With the help of Whitfield County

Public Works crews, though, the trailer has recently been remodeled and repurposed into a cattery, a facility that caters specifically to stray cats.

As she passed through the animal shelter and headed toward the cattery, Franklin paused a moment to point out a 10-foot by 6-foot pen where the cats had previously lived, right next to several pens of dogs, now woofing loudly at a visitor.

“All the barking kept the cats nervous,” she said, “kept them going all the time, stressed out all the time.”

Now, though, the cats are housed in a heated and cooled mobile home away from the dogs. The cattery features walls that have been coated with plastic panels to make for easier maintenance, plenty of windows that let light shine in, and a collection of climbing toys to entertain the cats and give them a place to lounge around.

On a recent Monday, inside one of several wire crates donated by residents, a surrogate mom was nursing the five newborn kittens – including two that required special attention to keep them alive. At one end of the building, Public Works has used wood and chicken wire to build a wall that sections off an area for storage of supplies.

“I’m telling you, Public Works is just as handy as can be,” an appreciative Franklin said. “I told them basically what we wanted, and within a month, it was done. It was their vision and they saw it and it was exactly what the cats need. You can see that they’re not stressed out now. They’re in cages, existing, away from the dogs, and that helps cats. It’s just more of a pleasant area for the cats.”

The goal, however, is for the cats not to stay in their new cattery for long, she says.

“We’re trying every day to find more cat rescues,” Franklin says, noting that most of them seem to be located in the western states, “and we also have open adoptions for local citizens. People that want to come and adopt a cat, all they have to do is have it spayed or neutered. There’s no fee. We’re trying everything that we can do to move them, but there’s just so many cats, it’s hard to do.”



With maximum capacity of 18 cats already reached that morning, Franklin was asked if additional crates would allow more cats to be kept at the facility. She admits she could easily fill them up.

“But that’s my problem,” she says. “Yes, I could fill them up, but I’ve got to be able to get them out, too. They’re all vaccinated now on intake, and we’re not hearing the sneezing and upper respiratory problems, so they all seem to be healthy cats at this point. But you can’t just keep holding them and feeding them ... and not moving them – that’s just a burden and expense on the county, and we just can’t afford that.”

To help solve the problem of animal overpopulation, Franklin is pushing for Whitfield County to become the first in Georgia to

make spaying/neutering of non-breeder animals mandatory – a move she believes over time would drastically reduce the number of dogs and cats at the animal shelter.

“We’re talking to our commissioners and our councilmen,” she said, “and we’re really trying to say we want to set the precedent in the state of Georgia, that we are the responsible county and we want to stop the reckless overbreeding of dogs and cats.”

About 200 animals were vaccinated at a reduced rate rabies clinic at the shelter on Saturday, and Franklin took advantage of the opportunity to ask many of the pet owners if their dogs and cats had been sterilized.

“I got good reception on that and bad reception,” she said.

“No, I’m not,” she heard from some.

“Well, let me tell you why I’m pushing it,” Franklin said, “and so we were able to hand out some information to them about spay/neuter. Hopefully I can go out in the community and just start to discuss this – let me tell you why you need to spay/neuter your cats and dogs because we just have an abundance, way too much that we can deal with. It’s just gonna take the hands-on, walking the streets and talking to people about it and putting it in the forefront.”

She believes adopting a mandatory spay/neuter ordinance now would pay major dividends in a decade.

“It will stop this department within 10 years,” Franklin said. “There would still be a need for a shelter, but the strays on the street that seem to be filling up our shelter, that will stop. I project in 10 years, you could see the effects of the spay/neuter ordinance and drastically eliminate the need for so much of this department.”

For proof, she can point to northern cities, where such spay/neuter policies have been in effect for years and adoptable animals are actually in short supply now. In fact, hundreds of dogs from Whitfield County have gotten a new lease on life up north after being placed there by rescue organizations in Georgia.

“We know our dogs are going to a great home - not just a good home, a great home - up north because they have to really show a lot of interest in getting the dogs there. They have to pay doggie day care because there’s just not places that you can go – greenspace – and walk your dogs up there. So we know that these dogs are not going to just homes, chances are they’re also going to doggie day cares, they’re going to trainings, it’s just an ideal situation where they are super compliant and responsible with their animal ownerships vs. the South is breeding recklessly. I’d love to be the first county in Georgia to say, okay, mandated spay/neuter.”

The aggressive work moving animals out of the shelter and to rescue organizations since Franklin took over as director last August has already paid off, with only one dog having to be put down at the shelter last month. While Franklin is thrilled with those results, she’s also realistic enough to know that number could climb in a flash.

“I could have somebody back in here in a few minutes with a truckload of dogs or cats, and I’ve got to do something with them,” she said, noting that once the shelter goes over state-regulated capacity, the dogs that have been there the longest have to be euthanized. “Unfortunately, we are still a shelter that has to use euthanizations sometimes. I don’t like that option, but it’s an option that I have and until we get responsible, it’s always gonna have to be an option.”

Just as it takes a coordinated team effort to run the shelter with Franklin, Cantrell, and fellow employee Kevin Tankersley, it also requires a team effort to save the lives of the animals.

The staff works constantly with animal-friendly organizations, including the Atlanta Humane Society and a rescue in Blue Ridge that has multiple avenues to move large numbers of dogs up north, often 15 to 20 at a time.

“Actually they’re coming from Blue Ridge tomorrow,” Franklin said, “and they’re pulling about seven more dogs from me, which is gonna be tremendous. Seven dogs leaving out of a shelter is a blessing because I know that seven more are gonna come in at any time, either through the owner surrender or the sheriff’s department animal control. So it’s a circle.”

Nobody wants to have to openly euthanize the animals, Franklin said.

“You’re not gonna fix the problem by just euthanizing everything that comes out here,” she said. “That’s not a fix, and you’re not gonna fix the problem just by rescuing everything that comes out here and adopting everything. I would much rather see them out alive and on a better path, but I would much rather see them not come in at all. That’s what we’ve got to work for.”

“If this county comes into compliance, we can move on to the next county and help them and mentor them and maybe help them bring their citizens up to being responsible owners. Always in the South, there will be loose and unattended animals and irresponsible animal

owners, unfortunately. We're gonna have to change a generation's way of thinking before this self corrects."

"But there's hope," Franklin says. "Whitfield County has stepped up to the plate. The commissioners have really been on board with changing it, and I think it's been a positive change. I'm hearing a lot of good things, and everybody says they want Whitfield County to come show them what we're doing. It's just about moving animals and being positive, trying to get everything out in a positive way. It's tough, it's hard work. There's nights I get up at 2 o'clock in the morning and hit the road (to take animals to rescue organizations that want them, often as far away as Virginia).

"I'm like, I'll be back," she says with a laugh. "But if that's what it takes, that's what it takes."
nIf you'd like to volunteer at the shelter, call 706-278-2018, option 2.