

White: *We must address pet overpopulation*

by **Debra J. White** - Aug. 3, 2011 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic Opinions Section

In 2010, Maricopa County Animal Care and Control and the Arizona Humane Society took in 94,132 dogs and cats. More than half were euthanized. And the shelters couldn't have done it without you, the public.

Pet overpopulation is a huge problem in Maricopa County. It has been for many years. Although we are No. 6 in city size, we have the second highest euthanasia rate in the country.

Pit bulls and pit mixes die more than any other breed, followed by Chihuahuas and Chihuahua mixes. There are simply not enough homes for the ones available in our shelters.

Too many are bred by inexperienced people trying to earn an extra buck. Thugs and drug dealers raise pit bulls for fighting, which is illegal in our state. It is also heartless and cruel. Pit bulls and Chihuahuas are sold recklessly, like goods at a swap mart, adding to our already staggering rate of unwanted animals. How often do you see puppy-for-sale signs on street corners and by stop signs? A reputable breeder doesn't advertise like this. In fact, some don't advertise at all.

Recent census figures demonstrate that Maricopa County is in transition. There are more renters than homeowners.

When pet owners move, even senior pets become disposable and end up at the shelter. Placement is almost impossible for older pets.

Relocating with pets is possible and some owners do it all the time. But if a pet isn't considered part of the family, the owner usually won't bother taking the necessary steps to keep their dog or cat, such as finding pet-friendly housing, buying an airline crate or visiting the veterinarian for a sedative for the long drive.

Spay-and-neuter curbs unwanted litters. The American Veterinary Medical Association says the only side effect of the spay/neuter operation is the dog or cat's inability to reproduce. Ample low-cost and even free programs are available.

Families mistakenly believe a dog or cat should have at least one litter for health reasons or so their children can witness the miracle of birth. But all those puppies and kittens have the potential to reproduce.

Is the family prepared to find homes for what could be thousands of pets? I don't think so.

And while they experience the miracle of birth, a shelter worker endures the agony of death euthanizing a tail-wagging dog or a purring cat.

The Greater Phoenix rescue community has more than 100 shelters and rescue groups working in tandem to save as many pets from euthanasia as possible.

Nearly all groups have too many animals and not enough money. They welcome the day when the last dog, cat, horse or rabbit leaves for a good home.

But as long as pet owners allow their pets to reproduce in droves and surrender them for trivial reasons, our euthanasia rate will remain high. And that won't change unless the public does.

For information about free and low-cost spay/neuter options, call the hotline at 602-265-7729 or visit the website of the non-profit Friends of Animal Care & Control at www.azfaccs.org. Remember to adopt a shelter pet. Our shelters and rescues are always full.

Debra J. White is on the board of the Phoenix Animal Care Coalition, which organizes pet-adoption events.