

REWARD

OF UP TO

\$5,000

Date: 09/06/2017
Submitted in PAW Committee
Council File No: 16-1434
Item No. 1
Deputy: Comm. from Public



A reward is being offered for tips leading to the conviction on cruelty charges of the person or persons who abandoned a white poodle in or beside a dumpster in an alleyway near 5961 Avalon Blvd. and E. 59th Pl. in South Los Angeles.

**IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION,
PLEASE CALL 323-644-PETA.**

PETA

Reporting a sick pup? You may get dial tone

Emergency calls often go nowhere, animal activists say

BY EMILY ALPERT REYES

Kendall Bryant was sitting at her desk in Virginia when she got the plea for help from South Los Angeles.

A woman had found an injured poodle in an alley, its white fur matted and dirty, and its small body shaking and circled by flies. She feared that if she moved the dog, she might hurt the animal even more.

She had tried to call the Los Angeles Department of Animal Services for help. But over and over, the woman said, she got disconnected.

So she emailed Bryant, who works for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

"I don't know what to do," the woman wrote.

For more than a year, animal welfare advocates have complained that emergency [See **Animal**, B5]



ECHO PARK resident Shannon Ashcraft, left, listens to Scott Tripamer and Mendoza of PETA. The group regularly fields emergency calls from Angelenos.

[Animal, from B1]
callers who find wounded or stray animals in Los Angeles have struggled to reach the city for help.

The toll-free number for Animal Services has a tedious menu that often leads to busy signals or leaves callers waiting in silence, unsure if anyone will pick up. If a caller initially makes a wrong selection and then tries to be connected to the nearest shelter instead, the system routinely sends the caller to a silent line.

The Times tried to reach L.A. shelters through the number and frequently got busy signals. In a few cases, a reporter was disconnected after a message saying the call could not be transferred. Los Angeles County, in contrast, has a list of emergency numbers that were answered within a few minutes.

"You might as well be calling to the moon," said Thomas Coy, a Shadow Hills resident who said he struggled to reach the department about his concerns about packs of coyotes nearby. He ended up calling the nonprofit Actors and Others for Animals, hoping it could help him because "animals" was in its name.

"We hear complaints all the time about people not getting through," said Actors and Others for Animals Executive Director Susan Taylor.

Other frustrated callers have turned to PETA, which says it regularly hears from Angelenos seeking urgent help with stray or injured animals through its national emergency number. Bryant, who works for PETA in Virginia, had heard from the South L.A. woman who found the injured poodle before, in another situation when she said she couldn't reach the city.

"How many animals go without help because of this cumbersome process?" Lisa Lange, PETA's senior vice president, complained in an email to Animal Services department head Brenda Barnette.

Animal Services attributed the problem to a rising number of calls that clogged up its phone lines but said it did not track those statistics.

Billing data provided by another city department, the Information Technology Agency, shows that calls to the Animal Services toll-free number have risen and fallen in the last 3½ years, with a modest bump in calls so far this calendar year.

Department spokeswoman Sara Ebrahimi said that another complaint — the silence that greets callers as they wait — was a result of a fire three years ago



MEL MELCON Los Angeles Times

SCOTT TRIPAMER and Diana Mendoza, right, talk to Echo Park resident Shannon Ashcraft about spaying and neutering pets as part of a PETA campaign.

'These complaints about looping around to a dead number have been around for as long as I've been here.'

—**MADELINE BERNSTEIN,**

of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals L.A.

that damaged its administrative offices, including phone equipment that had piped in music to waiting callers.

Animal Services began listing the direct numbers to each shelter on its website and is hiring more clerks to answer phones, but "it is clear that a more sophisticated phone system to deal with our day to day operations is needed," Ebrahimi wrote.

To get quicker help for emergency callers, Ebrahimi said the department will partner with the 311 call center that routinely handles complaints about graffiti, abandoned furniture left on the sidewalk and other city nuisances. The Animal Services phone tree will be reprogrammed to include an emergency option, which will transfer urgent calls to 311 to dispatch its animal rescue team, she said.

City officials have yet to determine how long those changes will take to implement or how much they will cost. Animal welfare advocates argue that the city is not moving fast enough,

even to make fixes that would prevent emergency callers from getting the run-around.

For instance, PETA has complained that a Los Angeles Police Department Web page with details on how to report stray animals includes several wrong numbers for shelters that go to the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium, Aflac and a disconnected line. As of Friday afternoon, the wrong numbers were still on the website.

"These would seem to be simple things that could be fixed immediately," Diana Mendoza, who coordinates PETA's Los Angeles Companion Animal Program, wrote to city commissioners in May.

Members of the Board of Animal Services Commissioners, who are appointed by Mayor Eric Garcetti, have repeatedly asked about problems with the phone system. Barnette told them in June that she had stopped getting complaints about "ghost phones" that hung up on people at one shelter, and she was "not aware of any phone systems that aren't working today."

When PETA disputed that in an email, Barnette replied that she knew of no "ongoing problems" with the phones, attributing busy lines to a surge of calls following a summer media blitz for adoption programs.

Some animal advocates said they avoid the toll-free number and reach out directly to individual staffers for help.

"I have not dialed it in years," said Madeline Bernstein, president of the Society for the Prevention of Cru-

elty to Animals Los Angeles. "These complaints about looping around to a dead number have been around for as long as I've been here."

Even when callers reach the city, they can end up facing long waits for help to arrive, advocates say. PETA says that as a result, its staffers have had to corral pit bulls running loose downtown, rush a badly injured cat from South L.A. to a veterinary clinic and get a wounded skunk in Echo Park to a shelter.

When the South L.A. woman who found the injured poodle continued to struggle to get through to the city, Bryant started calling Animal Services herself and said she was told that help was on the way.

But PETA said that after hours of waiting, a staffer ended up ferrying the poodle to the shelter, where it was later euthanized.

Some activists complain that as Animal Services has focused on reducing the euthanasia rate in its shelters and reaching its "no kill" goal, it has ignored the fate of animals that never get into the shelters.

"They're not getting helped. They just die. And they don't count on the stats," said Phyllis Daugherty, director of the nonprofit Animal Issues Movement.

Animal Services did not respond to additional questions about its response times, the injured poodle or the claims made by activists.

"The Department makes emergency responses the highest priority," Ebrahimi wrote in an earlier email.

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