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Animal rescuers go to great lengths to save doomed dogs

By Bob Shaw
bshaw@pioneerpress.com
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To Jimmie Williams, the pickup truck looked like salvation on wheels.

"There they are! I can see 'em!" he shouted as the truck pulled into a parking lot.

Out tumbled three dogs, bedraggled after their three-day journey. Saved from being euthanized in Kentucky, they sniffed around the legs of their rescuers, looking a little confused.

"I can't tell you how good this feels," said Williams, who was delighted to be adopting a rescued dog.

The trip was another small triumph for a new — and controversial — transportation system for animals.

In only a few years, the network has sprung up, saving thousands of dogs and cats from euthanasia in states that can't — or won't — support their own animal-welfare systems.

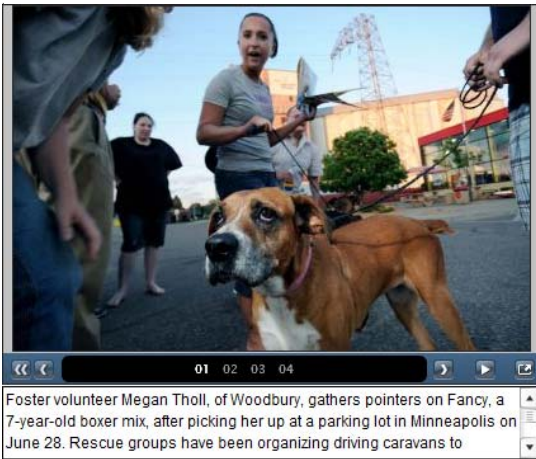
Supporters call it a new "underground railway." And like the transportation system that saved slaves in the 19th century, this one runs only one direction — from south to north.

It can involve truck caravans carrying up to 100 dogs. Or it can include a 900-mile airplane relay from Virginia to Minnesota to save a single cat, as happened June 25.

The flow into Minnesota is swelling rapidly — despite the fact that this state kills more than 20,000 of its own dogs and cats every year.

"This is compassion run amok," said Lynae Gieseke, director of the Minnesota Valley Humane Society.

Critics say the volunteers want to feel like heroes by making 11th-hour cross country rescues — when they could be



Foster volunteer Megan Tholl, of Woodbury, gathers pointers on Fancy, a 7-year-old boxer mix, after picking her up at a parking lot in Minneapolis on June 28. Rescue groups have been organizing driving caravans to

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saving animals in their own local shelters.

"This is like a mental illness in the animal-welfare community," said Mike Fry, manager of the Animal Ark No-Kill Shelter in Hastings. "We have a huge problem in shelters here. Why would you bring in any more dogs? We are oversaturated with dogs."

"It is crazy — it is insane. I don't get it," said Laura Johnson, president of the cat-rescue group SCRAM. "We have so many here who need help."

Even as they are swept up in the thrill of their missions, some volunteers wonder about the wisdom of what they are doing.

"It does seem odd to transport into a state that euthanizes. Maybe we should get our own house in order first," said Pete Howell, of Falcon Heights, who has flown his airplane on two missions to rescue two dogs.

"My attitude is: I am going to go flying anyway, so I might as well help."

CRIES FOR HELP

An animal's ticket to salvation begins on the Internet.

Of the estimated 4 million dogs and cats euthanized annually in America, a lucky few are targeted to be rescued, shortly before their deaths.

The dozens of transport groups often focus on certain breeds, as with the Chihuahua Rescue Transport or Dalmatian

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Overland Transport Service. Others help dogs of any breed, such as the Petsmart-sponsored Rescue Waggin' and the Georgia Puppy Pipeline.

The pleas for help often have a desperate tone, as shown in typical e-mails from June:

- "Jack will DIE at 4PM unless saved!" said one e-mail from Franklin, Ga., concerning a Labrador. "Hennessy (a collie) will DIE TODAY AT 4PM UNLESS SAVED AS THE SHELTER IS TOTALLY FULL!"
- "I am begging ... PLEASE someone step forward and help. ... This boy's eyes speak only of sadness and betrayal," said one plea from Raleigh, N.C., on behalf of a boxer.
- From Bowling Green, Ky.: "Shelter is desperately overcrowded, and euthing (sic) hundreds of animals for space. ... They DO NOT WANT to kill, they need rescue help NOW!"

Big-hearted animal-lovers respond.

They work with groups like Save Our Strays, which moved 15,000 unwanted dogs out of Missouri from 1998 to 2006.

After that, group founder Connie Guthrie moved to Oklahoma — and now Oklahoma is a source of dogs bound for Minnesota.

"We are very, very blessed to have Minnesota helping us," Guthrie said. "To give these dogs another chance is remarkable."

Local groups organize their own rescues, as Minnesota Boxer Rescue, of Woodbury, did in June. The group saves only boxers — and responded to an e-mail about three of them in Kentucky.

On June 28, Jon Wiswell, of Minneapolis, volunteered to drive from Eau Claire, Wis., to Minneapolis, the final leg of a relay to save three dogs. "If I were in their position, I would want someone to do that for me," Wiswell said.

Sometimes pilots respond. A South Carolina-based group called Pilots N Paws started 18 months ago — and has already made 1,000 flights to rescue animals.

The group's flight log shows that a paralyzed kitten was flown June 21 from Fremont, Mich., to Wichita, Kan. On May 11, two pit bulls — a breed often euthanized in Minnesota — were flown from Greenville, S.C., to Milaca, Minn.

Co-founder Debi Boies is looking forward to the "Pilots N Paws 5000" — with a goal of airlifting 5,000 animals in one week, Sept. 12-20.

Boies said gleefully: "Are we crazy people or what?"

TROUBLED TRIP

Some rescues end in sadness.

Last summer, volunteers from Puppy Porch, a St. Paul rescue group, heard about a troubled shelter in California about to euthanize about 100 dogs.

Why can't a state as big as California take care of its own dogs?

In fact, board member Britt Gage said, five rescue groups in California were offering to help. But the Puppy Porch volunteers wanted to save the dogs themselves.

"We approve of rescues, period. We do not care who is rescued, or how," Gage said. "We want to save every life, here or in California." The group has rescued animals as far away as the island of St. Maarten in the Caribbean.

When the Minnesota rescuers arrived in California, some dogs were sick. About 11 died after the group arrived. Some dogs remained behind, and 75 were loaded aboard three vans.

Seventeen more died during the cross country trek or shortly afterward.

Gage said that in Minnesota, the group spent "thousands" on medical care for the dogs. "We thought they had all been vaccinated. They came down with an illness we were not familiar with," she said.

"We did the best we could."

DEMAND FOR DOGS

The Animal Humane Society joined the system this year. So far, it has accepted 400 dogs from other states.

The society is Minnesota's largest animal-welfare agency, with an \$11 million annual budget and five locations.

Giving a tour of the society's complex in Golden Valley, Director Janelle Dixon gingerly opened a door with a sign saying, "Hearing protection recommended." Inside was a new batch of dogs from Oklahoma.

"Yesterday, we got in 34," Dixon shouted over the barking.

Dixon said more dogs do not mean more euthanasia — at least within the Animal Humane Society's system. She said the demand for dogs to adopt is high. A dog typically has to wait only three days in the society's kennels once it is cleared for adoption.

She said about 4 percent of the imported dogs are euthanized. The rest are adopted or are expected to be adopted quickly.

"We have a demand for dogs here. Where are people going to go? Pet stores? Puppy mills?" Dixon said.

"Doesn't it make sense to bring dogs from states where they aren't wanted into states where they are?"

Dixon showed off the spotless surgery rooms, where the society performs some of its 14,000 sterilizations a year.

Of the 10,000 dogs admitted each year, about 42 percent are euthanized — below the national rate of about 50 percent.

Like every shelter, she said, the Animal Humane Society kills only animals that are too sick or dangerous to be adopted.

No dogs, she said, are killed because of the interstate imports.

HERO COMPLEX

Other animal-welfare groups say that claim is short-sighted.

"For every dog brought in, there is a Minnesota dog euthanized because it could not find a home," said the Minnesota Valley Humane Society's Gieseke.

"It is just much more cool to save the life of a dog from Kentucky than to adopt one here."

Critics of the Animal Humane Society say it could adopt out many of the dogs and cats it kills — by spending more money to cure diseases or working harder to solve behavior problems.

Said Animal Ark's Fry: "We have a very large, very wealthy Animal Humane Society painting a pretty picture of Minnesota.

"They want people to think animals here are safe. If they were not killing those dogs for bogus reasons, they would not be able to take in those dogs from other states."

Cheryl Anderson, a volunteer with Minnesota Boxer Rescue, said that when the Animal Humane Society gets ready to euthanize dogs, it doesn't plead for help from local rescue groups — at least, not the way out-of-state groups send impassioned cries for help.

So volunteers rescue animals they do learn about, from other states.

Gieseke said the surge of animals being brought to Minnesota is partly because of another overpopulation problem —

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of rescue groups. [Petfinder.com](#) lists more than 180 in Minnesota. When those groups can't find local dogs to save, Gieseke said, they look to other states.

She said the only long-term solution to pet overpopulation is a nationwide spay and neuter program.

"You see all these desperate e-mails from Georgia or California. Might their time be better spent trying to sterilize more animals in their states?" Gieseke said.

She sees the same herocomplex phenomenon when a puppy mill is shut down, the dogs are confiscated, and the stories are told by local news outlets. Calls pour into her office from people wanting those dogs — while ignoring hundreds of others.

"I say: 'Wait a minute. Were you planning to add a dog to your family? Or does this just give you a good story to tell?'" Gieseke said.

FINDING A HOME

On a Sunday evening in June, Williams waited with a group of people outside a McDonald's Restaurant in Minneapolis for the delivery of dogs from Kentucky.

"It breaks your heart when you see these dogs online," said Megan Tholl, of Woodbury, as she ate a fish sandwich at a picnic table.

Finally, the pickup truck pulled in. The pitiful dogs climbed out. Eight people watching made a single sound in unison: "Awww ..."

Williams took an instant liking to his new dog, Tacoma. It took only a few licks in the face for Williams to start with the baby talk. "Oooh, oooh, you little kisser, you," he cooed to the dog.

Williams climbed into a car with his partner, Ron Snell, and they headed to their Minneapolis home.

"He needs a bath," Williams shouted out the window. His words were interrupted by licks on his face. "But he's giving me a bath!"

One badly starved dog looked like a skeleton in a pillowcase. "God, you can see every single bone," whispered driver Jon Wiswell.

He stroked the dog's scrawny back, and the dog looked up at him gratefully. "How could you say no to this face?" Wiswell said.

Bob Shaw can be reached at 651-228-5433.

1ST

U.S. rank in dog and cat populations among all countries, with 145 million total

17,000

Animals euthanized annually by Twin Cities animal shelters

15,000

Dogs shipped to northern states from Missouri by a single rescue group from 1998 to 2006.

42 PERCENT

Share of dogs euthanized by Animal Humane Society, of Golden Valley, compared with about 56 percent nationally.

70 PERCENT

Share of U.S. cats admitted to shelters that are euthanized

Sources: National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy, Humane Society of the U.S., [Mapsoftheworld.com](#)

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