

Animal Vocation Resources, LLC
Case Studies
Animal Control Series

Case Study # 1: Is this job for you?

Target areas: New employee, understaffed animal control

Scenario:

There is a young woman in her early twenties who desperately wants to work with animals. She has spent a large part of her formative years as a volunteer helping the causes for animal welfare, but has worked in retail up until now. She really wants a change and wants to help animals as a full time career. She decides to take classes about dog training, go to seminars about animal handling and try to read as much as she can about all topics on animal welfare related issues.

She hears about a job opening at the municipal animal control department. She recalls having been there once before with a friend who found a stray dog. The dog was dropped off in hopes an owner would claim the dog. A day later the dog was claimed. She even recalls that when there, the kennel was full to capacity, the dogs were very loud and the place seemed very active, with lots of adoptions and people milling about. The cat room was about the size of a one car garage and included in the mix of cats and kittens that room even housed a few puppies and older, small dogs. Her vague memory was also that the building itself was out of date for modern animal shelter standards; but she still thinks this is a great opportunity to get a job helping animals.

So the young woman goes to the town hall and fills out an application.

During the interviews she is told she will be working under the Police Department enforcing city and state statutes as they relate to public safety issues as well as impounding roaming, stray and potentially vicious animals. This is also a union job, with very specific rules to the job itself. She will also be required to help with adoptions and rabies clinics.

The interview with her potential supervisor goes well. He is a police sergeant with no prior animal training, but is there to write tickets, manage and supervise the staff and to make certain all ordinances and laws are properly enforced. She in turn, likes being with the animals, but sees the job might not be all about just the animals, but more about protecting the public.

She is offered the job. She thinks this is great and believes she can live out her life passion, helping animals. A uniform order is placed but in the meanwhile she can wear clean blue jeans and a volunteer t-shirt.

Her first day of work is to begin at 7:00 am and she thinks she will be given training on how to deal with the public, learn about the shelter animals, fill out official paperwork and possibly shadow the supervisor during the afternoon. But upon her arrival, she finds out one of the kennel cleaners called out sick and there is no one else to cover the shift.

The police sergeant assigns her to the kennel area to assist the lone kennel worker in cleaning cages and feeding the animals. After all, he tells her, she needs to know all aspects of the animal control facility. She is told to move dogs, scoop poop, take out empty food and water bowls and to hose down the dirty runs. She has never been trained on any of this and isn't really sure what to do. She asks lots of questions and the kennel worker, though nice, seems a bit annoyed at all of her inquires and also at her slow pace. They have a certain routine and it seems as if she might be making more work for him with all of her uncertainty. The sergeant seems unaffected by her lack of knowledge or speed and just tells her that she will get it, sooner or later. He continues his day in the office, while she tries to keep up in the kennels.

Some Questions to Ponder:

- Is this really what she should be doing without proper training?
- What about the union rules? Kennel staff is in another union with different guidelines. Is the supervisor breaking union rules?
- Isn't there a back up plan already set up for when an employee calls out sick or is on vacation?
- Is there any type of orientation to be attending? Both for animal handling, as well as general new employee responsibilities? What about basic first day forms like the W2's, insurance forms, OSHA requirements and a policy and procedure manual?
- Should the new employee express to the supervisor that she doesn't know the proper cleaning protocols, dog handling skills and general working arrangements of the kennel?
- Should she be concerned about her own safety? Should the supervisor be worried about potential liability or injury to his new hire?
- Should she be concerned about the health of the animals? After all, if she doesn't know how to properly mix bleach and water or how to use the cleaning solution, then shouldn't she be taught about that stuff first?

Discussion

The Challenge:

The challenge is for the supervisor to find an appropriate way to get both the new employee properly trained on the duties she has been hired for as well as to make certain the shelter operation runs smoothly.

The new employee wants to be cooperative on her first day, but knows she does not have the proper training for the task at hand and doesn't know how to address the situation with her new boss.

Key Principle:

A standard new employee orientation would be a great tool to offer to new hires. This way both the supervisor and the new employee know what is expected of them in the new job. The new employee orientation will also lay the groundwork so any new employee will eventually be trained on all aspects of animal handling.

But for this unexpected situation, there should be an alternative plan already in place for such events as an employee out sick or out on vacation, etc. They should not rely on staff who are responsible for other duties because then those departments will essentially be left in a deficit. It should be recognized that if the new employee concentrates on the duties of kennel cleaning then the job which she was hired for will suffer, as it will now take longer to train her in the necessary activities and will result in the department once again lacking man power to get the job done.

The new employee knows that cross training in all departments is a necessary part of her duties. She was expecting to learn all the duties, but not on her first day. Comparing this to her previous employment, she is aware of the lack of structure and coordination regarding what she is being trained and hired for. She begins to wonder if this is the right job for her.

Suggestions:

1. The department could easily create a new employee orientation and protocols format. The orientation could include how to manuals, safety guidelines, and any other relevant materials that a new employee needs to be trained on.
2. If there is no formal training and employees are just expected to jump in wherever needed, then as the new employee keeping notes and even starting a journal or log book is imperative.
3. The department could also have an alternative plan set up for when someone calls out ill. Volunteers or an off duty employee might alleviate some of expectations to have one staff person do too much.
4. To solve the problem on that particular day, the supervisor could also compromise with the kennel duties; for example, have the new hire spend half her time in the kennels and yet still offer her training later in the day for the duties she was originally hired for.

Proposed Resolution:

The supervisor recognizes that a basic written version of an orientation is an invaluable tool and makes a mental note to see its creation becomes priority. In the meanwhile, he re-evaluates the present situation and calculates exactly what a first day new employee function should be while still ensuring the kennel functions accordingly.

In order to have ample time to get the shelter cleaned for the public, he decides to open the shelter an hour later. He offers overtime to an off duty employee who accepts, but only for a half of a day. That is ok; it buys extra time and allows him the ability to spend time training the new employee. The supervisor plots out the morning, which consists of reviewing all forms and documents required of a new hire. He reviews tax forms, the municipality's employee handbook and benefits packages and makes certain she understands as much as she can about the basics of her new employer. He also goes over the duties of an animal control officer, shows her the complaint log book, police dispatch codes and other relevant papers and forms. He feels good that the turn of events has led him to recognize the importance of training new employees. He believes that if all goes well, at the end of the day both he and the new hire will feel that they have a mutual understanding of the expectations and responsibilities to make her a valued team member.

As for the new employee, she spends time in the morning with her new boss, receiving a full overview of the expected duties, getting mundane paperwork out of the way, and has every assurance she will be put in the system in order to receive a timely paycheck.

After her hour lunch break, she returns ready to shadow the kennel worker. Being cautious and curious about the difficulties of hands-on animal care, she is a quick study and makes certain to ask lots of questions. With that she has a better understanding of how her job relates to this position. She also keeps a list of questions for her new boss, hoping they can be used in the creation of a new employee manual.

Now, at the conclusion of her first day she feels more confident than she did at the beginning of her new career. She better understands her role and participation as the newest team member and though she still hasn't had any hands on training for the position hired, she at least has insight of the shelter and the municipality she now works for.