

McHenry County Animal Control volunteers are an essential part of its mission to help find animals forever homes and spread the word about animal welfare issues.



Heart & Soul

| by Erica Burke |
Photography by Robin Pendergrast

Volunteers' time, love and commitment to animal welfare and advocacy enables McHenry County Animal Control to find animals happy homes.

Most people consider pets a part of their family and treat them as such by providing them with a safe, loving environment. McHenry County Animal Control (MCAC) volunteers do this on a much bigger scale every day by not only protecting our county's animals and helping them find happy homes, but by shielding us from disease and injury associated with some animals.

"We are very proud of our staff, volunteers and facility," said Kara Plonczynski, volunteer coordinator. "In October alone, for example, we had 57 volunteers who donated 842.5 hours of their time. We are truly privileged to have such amazing, dedicated volunteers — they are the heart and soul of our adoption center."

MCAC averages about 50 volunteers a month who dedicate as much time as they are able. Twelve of those volunteers have been with MCAC since the program was founded five years ago.

"They helped us build this volunteer program into what it is today and with each new volunteer, we evolve," she said. "We're always looking for more."

Volunteers serve a number of purposes, from advocating for the Adoption Center to educating the public about animal welfare issues that affect the community.

"Our success comes in finding animals forever homes and having a community that understands animal welfare issues — our volunteers are integral in helping us achieve that success," Plonczynski said.

A Passion for Animals

Ideal MCAC volunteers have a deep passion for working with animals. "We can train a person on animal care and how to socialize an animal, but that passion for animals that lives in a person's heart is one of the most important characteristics we look for in a volunteer," Plonczynski said.

In return for volunteers' work, "the rewards are beyond words," she said. "Imagine falling in love with a particular pet and watching that pet thrive from the relationship that you have with it and then seeing that pet find someone to pass that love onto," she said. "It seems every time a volunteer falls in love with an animal, the animal finds a forever home — we like to think of it as karma."

Catherine Morgan, a volunteer dog walker

from Cary knows the power of this love first-hand. “It’s amazing seeing the change in the animals from when they first come in terrified to wagging their tails after working with them — they all get to know us,” she said. “I feel fortunate to have been able to learn how to train dogs, too. I never thought I would be handling 80-pound pit bulls and I have learned you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

Morgan said the relationships built are not limited to those with the animals. “There is something very rewarding in the camaraderie — we are a tight little crew here,” she added.

Volunteers Arline and husband Dave Shouldice from Lake in the Hills donate on average 60 hours a month to MCAC.

“Knowing that you are able to offer these animals that have become homeless through no fault of their own that extra dose of love that helps them feel wanted and loved helps me more than it helps them, I think!” according to Arline.

The volunteers witness how much work it is to take care of the daily business of cleaning and feeding and vetting the animals, Plonczynski said.

“They understand how important their role in caring for the animals alongside of staff is,” she said. “The efforts they make in socializing the animals are integral in the care of the animals. They realize that this love and socialization helps the animals become more adoptable.”

Volunteers also directly witness some of the hardest issues MCAC faces in terms of animal cruelty and neglect.

“They come to understand the challenges we face in educating people on animal welfare issues,” she said. “They also get frustrated when they get a taste of what it is like to work so hard for the animals and care for them and have people still have that negative stereotype that exists about animal control. The good thing is that all of this makes them want to work that much harder to protect animals and educate others.”

Ways to Volunteer

MCAC realizes although volunteering is not for everyone, advocacy is.

“One of the biggest things I would like the community to help us do is spread the word that we are this great entity here to serve the people and animals of the community we live in,” Plonczynski said. “I invite everyone to come in and see us at any time to check out our beautiful facility and see the amazing animals we have for adoption. I hope they take the time to become aware of what a great animal



A Day in the Life

Volunteers are a major lifeline of MCAC’s adoption center. A typical day in the life of a volunteer is cleaning the adoption center between the hours of 8 a.m. and 10:30 a.m., so when adoption hours start at 10:30 a.m., the animals are ready to meet their prospective new family.

After 10:30 a.m., volunteers socialize the animals by walking the dogs, playing with the cats, and light grooming as needed. We also have volunteers assist us with office work and various other odd jobs as they arise. The volunteers really get to know the animals as they socialize them so they make great adoption counselors, as well. The volunteers will tell you one of the best parts of their time here is spent introducing the animals to their prospective new families and finding that perfect match.

Volunteers are also helping us develop a foster program. During kitten season, we always have a need for foster homes. It is so much better for the mother cats to have their kittens born in a home environment. If all goes well, the mother cat will take care of her kittens. However, if that does not happen, volunteers become that surrogate mother feeding the kittens every two hours throughout the night.

Fostering is a huge commitment and we are so grateful to our volunteers for taking on this job so we can offer these animals the love and care they deserve.

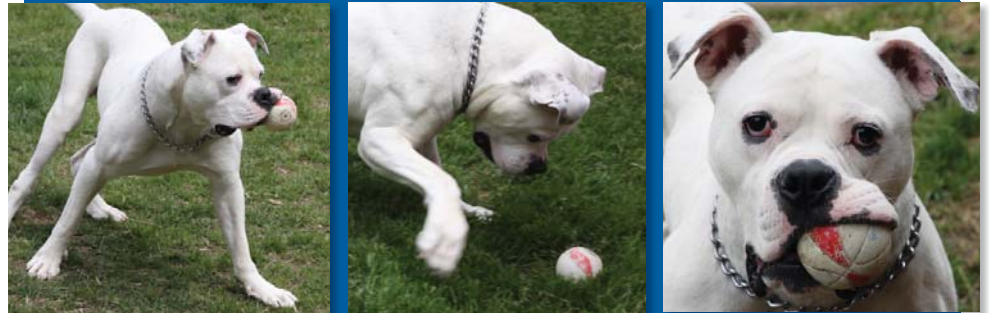
~ Kara Plonczynski, volunteer coordinator

control and adoption center McHenry County Health Department has.”

MCAC also has a wish list for items that help enrich the lives of the animals in its care such as medium and large Kongs with stuffing treats, large Chuckit! Balls for training and cat toys. It also needs used items such as newspapers, aluminum cans, towels, blankets and bowling balls for enrichment.

Additionally, community members can get involved with MCAC’s nonprofit group, Friends of McHenry County Animal Control and Adoption Center (www.mcdh.info), which helps spread the word about the wonderful animals in the care of MCAC and helps to increase adoption rates and educate the public about MCAC. Friends also has a long-term goal of establishing a spay/neuter clinic to eventually reduce the number of stray animals in our county, thus reducing the number of homeless animals filling the shelters in the community. ■

>> MCAC is located at 100 N. Virginia St. in Crystal Lake. For more, call 815-459-6222 or visit www.mcdh.info (click “Animal Control”). See adoptable pets at www.mcac.petfinder.org. If your pet is missing, visit www.petharbor.com.



Volunteers Help Bubba Heal, Find a Home

Recently, MCAC had a bulldog, Bubba, fostered by a volunteer. The volunteer and her family cared for Bubba for more than five months to rehabilitate him from knee surgeries. Several other volunteers took Bubba back and forth to Woodstock and Crystal Lake for therapy sessions with two wonderful therapists who donated some of their own time. Over the summer, another volunteer and her family donated their pool so Bubba could benefit from water therapy. We have a volunteer who is a chiropractor and she came in weekly to help Bubba with even more intense therapy. We did fundraisers through Friends of MCAC to raise funds to help with Bubba’s medical care, which involved a great community effort. Needless to say, Bubba stole the hearts of many, filled those hearts with love and we’re all changed for the better for knowing him. Bubba found his forever home in November with an amazing family who brings Bubba in weekly so volunteers can continue his therapy and to give us our Bubba love!

~ Kara Plonczynski, volunteer coordinator