

DOGS' BEST FRIEND

Katy animal control officer finds his niche

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One morning in late September, Doug Worthy chased down two dogs that had escaped from their fenced yard for the second straight day.

Worthy, an officer with Katy's Animal Control Department, picked up the dogs — one of which was aggressive, but easily bribed by food — and returned them home. He didn't ticket the owners but told them that they need a new fence, because the dogs had dug through the existing wooden one.

"I could easily have taken the dogs, charged the pound fee and issued a citation, but I try not to do that," he said.

Worthy, 41, is an animal lover who happens to enforce city ordinances

pertaining to animals. Violations are Class C misdemeanors, punishable by a fine. The average fine is \$96 to \$104.

He said he wants to change the way people perceive animal control.

"I'm trying to show people animal control is a caring department," he said, debunking the image of a unsympathetic official at the ready to seize a family pet and issue a citation.

Worthy said he will do everything in his power to save an animal, and he rarely issues citations on first offenses. Instead, he'd rather try to find ways to solve the problems — he even carries tools in his kennel truck in case a resident needs help mending a fence.

"We try to go out of our way to help solve the problem, not create more," he said.

About four years ago, Worthy became Katy's first full-time animal-

control officer, responsible for picking up animals killed on the road, keeping threatening dogs away from city meter readers, tracking down escaped family pets or capturing wild animals rifling through trash.

From July 2002 to June 2003, animal control responded to 970 calls, issued 50 citations and took in 313 dogs and 264 cats, Worthy said. Business has increased; the year before the department responded to 553 calls.

All the calls are handled by Worthy or his father, Roy Worthy, the department's part-time officer. Worthy is based at the police department, 5456 Franz Road. The number to call for a missing pet or a problem with a wild animal is 281-391-4848.

Both men are state-certified animal

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Catcher

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control officers. That requires attending a two-day school and taking 30 hours of school every three years. The city paid for Doug Worthy to go to the course offered at the Houston Animal Control Department.

For dogs, ordinances prohibit running loose and vicious tendencies, such as snapping at a child.

All dogs must have city tags with rabies tags to show that they've had their shot. They also must have a collar and must be on a leash in public.

People can have no more than three cats or three dogs in one house. But a home can have up to three of each.

The fine for having more is \$169, regardless of the number of animals involved.

The only other ordinance for cats is that they must have their rabies shots.

Roy Worthy was the city's first certified animal-control officer when he was hired part time in 1993. Before that, a city employee in the utilities department responded to calls about animal problems.

Roy Worthy, 69, said he's less lenient than his son. When he was the only animal control officer, the elder Worthy made some enemies, including one who dumped a bucket of nails in his driveway one morning.

"It's easy for people to hate Doug and me," he said. "People don't want us telling them what to do with their dogs."

But the city has laws, and it's the Worthys' job to enforce them, Roy Worthy said.

When Roy Worthy started working animal control, a person couldn't walk down the street without a dog coming up to them, he said. He wanted to put a stop to that.

"I'm getting older myself, and I wouldn't like to get bit during a walk," said Roy Worthy, 69.

In 1996, Doug Worthy was hired part time. He became full time four years ago, when the city started getting increased calls for help with animals.

On a typical day, he'll report to work at 8 a.m. and check his messages, then go to the shelter to feed and check on the animals there. But his hours are flexible to meet the demands of the job.

The scariest moments have

been when he's almost been bitten by a dog. He never actually has been bitten, although his father has a scar on his hand from a dog bite. Doug has been bitten by cats many times.

A few years ago, a woman called and said a lizard was in her tree. Worthy thought, so what, it's a tiny lizard in a tree. Then he arrived there and discovered it was a 3½-foot iguana.

Worthy also goes into schools to teach children, up through fifth grade, how to care for and love their pets. He also teaches them to be cautious of wild animals, and identifies which ones are most likely to have diseases. He advises them to leave the animals alone and call his department.

For his school presentations, he uses puppets to keep the children's attention.

On a recent morning, both Worthys responded to a call for help from a meter reader. The city employee couldn't get to a meter on a resident's property because a pit bull on the other side of the fence was menacing him.

"The dog is doing what he's supposed to do," Doug Worthy said. "He's protecting the owner's property. It's not a bad dog."

Worthy hopped over the fence and banged his catch pole — a long metal rod that can be used to keep an animal at bay or to beat it off a person — against a nearby tree to establish who was in charge. The pit bull understood and stopped, watching Worthy warily.

Then Worthy started talking to the other two dogs in the yard. They were docile and appeared to like the attention he showed them.

The pit bull stayed at bay as the meter reader did his job.

Scars covered the pit bull's face. There could be many reasons for the scars — a brawl with another dog, rubbing against the metal objects that clutter the yard or being hit by a car. But Worthy said the scars were a red flag that warrant investigation.

He soon learned that the dog has cut its face trying to dig out under the metal fence that keeps him in the yard.

While growing up, Doug Worthy had all sorts of pets: Dogs, rabbits, horses, chickens, armadillos, raccoons and even a fox. The animal lover in him influences how he does his job.

The city's ordinance says he

Katy plans to build animal shelter

Katy City Council recently approved \$150,000 in reserve funds to build an animal shelter, with an office.

The current shelter is at the city's wastewater treatment plant. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality doesn't permit residents on the premises. For pet owners looking for their missing dog or cat, Doug Worthy, the animal control officer, must drive the approximately two miles to pick up animals and take them to the Katy Police Department, which is where animal control is based.

Also, state officials with the Texas Department of Health Zoonosis Control Division,

which monitors animal control, have told Katy it needs to either update its facilities or get out of the animal-control business. In the latter case, the city would have to contract with an outside agency to deal with errant pets and wild animals.

Plans for the new shelter are preliminary, but Worthy said the \$150,000 should be able to build a 40-by-50 climate-controlled shelter that would hold 18 to 24 animals in regular pens, with some additional pens for quarantining individual animals. Four of the 14 dog pens at the shelter now are designated to hold quarantined animals.

should wait three days before getting rid of an untagged animal, six days for a tagged one. But Worthy usually waits longer, usually a week. Then if no one has called to claim the animal, he either attempts to find a home for the animal or takes it to Citizens for Animal Protection, a pet adoption center on the Katy Freeway between Dairy Ashford and Kirkwood.

He said it's surprising how often people don't call for an animal that obviously is someone's pet.

He releases captured wild animals in the country.

Occasionally, Worthy has to euthanize an animal, but that's a last resort, and he refuses to destroy an adoptable one.

Usually, he euthanizes by injection animals that are sick or injured beyond recovery or because they are too vicious. Older feral cats, which can't be tamed, are put to sleep. The city does not donate animals to use in research or education.

He said he euthanizes about 10 or 15 animals a month, the vast majority cats. It's been about five months since he last destroyed a dog.

"Not a day goes by when I don't think about having to (euthanize an animal), and wondering if I'm doing the right thing," he said. "If the animal is wild and mean, it's a little easier."

If there's any hope for an animal, he'll do what he can to tame it so it would be appropriate for adoption, said Worthy, who has

a wife of 18 years, two children — ages 13 and 17 — and a golden retriever.

Worthy's next call on this warm morning is to pick up a animal trap he'd loaned to a trailer park resident who had complained about a stray cat.

He has 13 traps that he loans out for free to catch nuisance animals. He asks only that borrowers sign for traps so he can remember where they are. He will show residents how to set the trap and put food under the cage to increase the likelihood of catching the animal.

Worthy said he expected the cat at the trailer park would be wild and old, meaning he would need to euthanize it. When he got there, though, he found a tiny, frightened kitten that didn't appear wild.

Some of the animals he finds are so young they require bottle feeding. He doesn't have the time for it; so he relies on volunteers to foster the kittens. He also relies on donations, made to an account at ABC Feed in Katy, for the actual formula.

He never names animals because that would lead to him getting attached to them.

Jessica Ellis, Citizens for Animal Protection assistant manager, said of Worthy, "He actually brings the animals in because he genuinely cares about them. He's the only (animal control officer) around who cares enough to bring them in."