Humane society, fast squad, and PD get training on how to handle animals experiencing trauma

By Aaron Rubin
Standard Correspondent

At the end of November, the Lucy Mackenzie Humane Society recently received the benefit of training sessions with the Canadian nonprofit Veterinarians Without Borders (VWB). VWB taught the West Windsor animal shelter how to more effectively treat animals in difficult situations with respect and compassion.

According to its website, VWB's mission is to continue to break international barriers while bettering the health of animals, humans, and the environment — the same ethos which is at heart of the World Health Organization-endorsed "One Health" approach. This model for sustainability considers the interconnectedness of the health of animals, humans, and our shared environment, says VWB's Executive Director Charmaine Brett.

"If you're going to have a single sector of focus where you're just coming in and focusing on animals and not looking also at the people and the environment, then you're not going to have a holistic model that's going to have the impact that you really want on the ground," said Brett.

Considering all three legs of the One Health philosophy is how, Brett said, the organization can best find a "solutions-based approach" to its programming, which spans from West Windsor to Maui, Hawaii, and livestock-centered communities in Ghana.

One of the services VWB provides for animal welfare organizations is working with shelters like Lucy Mackenzie on improving response and handling of a difficult situation involving an animal, while keeping individual volunteers safe in the process. This training was very appealing to the shelter's Executive Director Jackie Stanley, who contacted VWB following a conversation between Lucy Mackenzie and the West Windsor Volunteer Fast Squad, who are often faced with handling animals in difficult situations.

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> — VWB International Companion Animal & Humanitarian Specialist John Peaveler

"What we're seeing in their role is going into homes where people have needed to leave either for emergency reasons or they're deceased and the responders have to deal with the animals that are left in the home," explained Stanley. "They know nothing about these animals. [For] the animal, it's been a chaotic time — they see their human companion being taken away. The first responders need to know how to safely remove the animals from the home and to place them either in a temporary foster home or in a shelter, or help to transport them to maybe a relative or a family member," said Stanley. "We agreed that we [should] start looking for somebody that could do some sort of safe handling with animals."

That somebody was John Peaveler, the International Companion Animal & Humanitarian Specialist with VWB who guided shelter volunteers and personnel from the Fast Squad and the Windsor Police Department through two four-hour sessions. Peaveler covered a range of topics that included animal handling, behavior, and capture techniques with the goal of giving participants "the widest possible range of options, so that they can exercise the lowest possible level of restraint in any given situation," he said

Peaveler guided volunteers and emergency personnel on what to do when handling and capturing a particularly violent dog by using self-protection techniques that utilize holds, leashes, muzzles, leash and Y poles, and hand-capture techniques, among others.

"The goal of any animal welfare or first response professional should be to lower stress and de-escalate any encounter. We want to use the least invasive and least aversive method of capture and/or handling possible," said Peaveler. "Injuries and lost animals have a range of consequences for both people and animals, so we want to utilize tools and techniques that will get us the best outcome for everyone."

Training was performed entirely with stuffed animals, an approach that Stanley said is not unusual.

Both Stanley and Peaveler found that the training was especially important for police and fast squad personnel. Peaveler, a former volunteer Animal Control Officer in West Fairlee, understands that there are communities that have responders, like the fast squad, whose primary responsibilities do not revolve around animals, or who may have ACOs who are volunteers and may be not as knowledgeable in their response to difficult situations involving animals.

On top of the immediate responsibilities to their respective roles, "These people also end up, sort of by default, being the animal control officer for whatever situation," said Peaveler. "They wanted to have training for themselves and for their staff so that they can do their jobs as professionally, humanely as possible...because, by nature of being in small communities, they're the first on scene and they have to deal with however the cards are dealt."

Stanley said of the experience, "I think when we look at training like this, it really does go back to, 'How can we provide services to the community?' And that's both humans and animals. A lot of our responsibility as the shelter is [to consider] how we can go into these situations compassionately, respectfully and safely." She added, "You don't want to create more trauma for the animal. You want to minimize that trauma because they've already been through so much, unfortunately."

Peaveler reflected positively on his experience working at the shelter, also praising Lucy Mac's "community-centric approach." "Lucy Mackenzie, the Windsor Police Department, and the local fast squad [are] incredible examples of ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and it's our privilege at VWB to support people like them around the world as they take a One-Health approach to a better life for everyone."

Stanley reflected on what was positive and "brilliantly" performed training for volunteers and emergency responders, and also for those, such as herself, who have been deeply involved in animal welfare for a long time.

"I think it's setting us up for success in the future in situations where there are so many unknowns and [its] all geared towards handling the animal humanely and respectfully with compassion, and then also to keep the humans safe," Stanley concluded.



John Peaveler is the International Companion Animal & Humanitarian Specialist who has done in-person training sessions with shelters and animal control units in Vermont, Colorado, and Pennsylvania, and virtual sessions with partners in Ukraine and Saipan. Kaitlyn Esposito Photo



Livestock farming revolving around dairy goats and cows are a source of economic opportunity and livelihood for communities in Kenya, where VWB has supported its livestock farmers in over 100 hours of training sessions to improve health conditions for animals and locals. Kaitlyn Esposito Photo



Improving the health and sustainability of animals around the world is made possible by VWB and its volunteers, including in its Happy Paw Feeding Program in Ukraine. Kaitlyn Esposito Photo

