

Gov't backs campaign to change pet disposal sites to shelters

TOKYO —

The central government is rallying behind local governments in turning facilities where abandoned dogs and cats are put to sleep into shelters where the animals can get new owners. The Animal Protection Guidance Center in Funabashi, Chiba Prefecture, a city along the Bay of Tokyo with many warehouses and plants, is a forerunner of such shelters.

In a garden-like space surrounded by wire cloth, several dogs are kept, and a center employee is taking one of them on a walk. Within the center, there are “private rooms,” and the temperature is maintained by ventilation.

“I think we can wipe out the old prison-like image,” said Tetsuji Kusa, a section chief at the city’s health center who has helped from the designing stage to turn the detention center into a shelter.

“We are trying to achieve zero disposal and keep dogs and cats which become attached to people. We kept one animal for seven months until its new owner was found,” he said.

Fusako Nogami, representative of Alive, an animal protection organization in Tokyo, said such facilities are still few. “Many facilities pack dogs and cats into concrete-reinforced rooms with no air conditioning or ventilation and dispose of them in gas rooms several days later.”

According to a nationwide survey by Alive, about 100,000 dogs and some 210,000 cats were disposed of in fiscal 2007, while about 30,000 dogs and some 6,500 cats were returned to their owners or found new owners.

In recent years, however, people, mostly those in urban areas, have come to regard pets as members of their families and keep them in rooms in their houses, reducing the number of those brought to health centers. Dogs and cats disposed of totaled about 650,000 in 1997, but the number has halved, and those handed over to new owners are gradually increasing.

As the number of dogs and cats brought to detention centers is decreasing, the centers can now have some leeway, enabling them to extend the period before disposal. The Environment Ministry also plans to start in the current fiscal year 2009 to extend subsidies to turn such facilities across the country into shelters.

But there are many problems before zero disposal can be achieved. Many cats that are put to sleep are newly born stray cats. Unless the cats are neutered, like domestic cats, facilities say they must keep disposing of kittens.

The situation differs depending on regions. For example, in Tokyo and Kanagawa Prefecture,

there are many people who want puppies but few puppies are kept at shelters. On the other hand, more than 1,000 puppies are put to sleep annually in Ibaraki and Tochigi prefectures.

Nogami said, “There are problems with the transfer of such abandoned animals to other prefectures, including conducting follow-up checks, but that is possible if there are tie-ups between animal protection organizations in and outside prefectures.”

“It is desirable for the local governments to improve detention facilities while the private sector becomes in charge of transfer consultations and follow-up procedures.”