

# Pet shelter opens in prison

- By [JAMES MINTON](#)
- Advocate Baker - Zachary bureau
- Published: Dec 15, 2010 - Page: 1B

JACKSON — East Feliciana Parish finally has a public-supported animal shelter and adoption center for the care of unwanted cats and dogs roaming the parish.

And the state now has another facility to temporarily shelter pets that could be displaced because of a natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina.

The Pen Pals Inc. Dog and Cat Shelter and Adoption Center is open for business within the fences of Dixon Correctional Institute, a medium-security prison on La. 68 near this town.

The shelter and adoption facility is in a new building on the site where the old chapel used to be.

That chapel was torn down after a new chapel was built on the prison grounds.

The Humane Society of the United States gave the prison \$600,000 to build the new facility, which has room for 52 dogs in its adoption center.

A large, pavilion-style building a short distance away also has space for cages for displaced pets in an emergency.

Corrections Secretary James M. LeBlanc told visitors touring the facility Tuesday that the idea for the shelter might have originated from an incident in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Corrections officers from around the state were involved in moving 10,000 prisoners from facilities in the New Orleans area when LeBlanc said he and then-Secretary Richard Stalder happened upon a puppy struggling to keep its head above water on a flooded interstate highway.

As the lower-ranking officer, LeBlanc joked that he knew he would have to leave the dry confines of their vehicle to rescue the puppy, which was eventually named “Evac” and now resides with a deputy corrections secretary.

Later, DCI took in about 200 dogs and cats to ease the load on the volunteers who were caring for rescued animals at the Lamar-Dixon Center in Gonzales.

“We learned a lot from that,” said LeBlanc, who was then DCI’s warden. “We also learned that the experience of caring for the animals changed our offender population.”

Laura Maloney, chief of staff for the Humane Society, said she remembers the bond between the animals and the prisoners who cared for them.

“A dog doesn’t judge you. It’s just happy for you to be there,” she said.

DCI Deputy Warden Janet Lorena said a corporation, Pen Pals Inc., is applying to the Internal Revenue Service for non-profit status that will make donations to the center tax-deductible.

“Once that happens, I think people will begin to give,” Lorena said.

The center has about \$89,000 remaining from the Humane Society grant that will enable it to operate through June without additional revenue, she said.

Corrections Col. John Smith, who heads the unit, said the center accepts dogs and cats from East Feliciana Parish only, with law enforcement agencies expected to be its main source of strays.

Anyone, regardless of residence, may adopt an animal for a \$40 fee. Arrangements to view the pets up for adoption can be made by calling (225) 634-1200, Smith said.

The LSU School of Veterinary Medicine is the third partner in the venture, with LSU veterinarians and students making regular visits to the facility to spay and neuter the animals and provide veterinary care.

“It’s beautiful. It’s wonderful, and it’s clean. There’s not enough descriptive words,” Dr. Wendy Wolfson, an LSU veterinarian, said of the facility, which includes a room for surgery and facilities for bathing animals.

Five inmates assigned to work with the animals “take superb care of them,” Wolfson said.

Ron Johnson, Smith’s office orderly, said he prefers the center’s dogs to the cats.

“Cats have another attitude,” he said.

Inmate workers Ronald Beechler, Bryant Hayes, Paul Hills and James Ziegler have earned certificates through the LSU Vet School’s Shelter Medicine Program.

“It took a lot of studying,” Ziegler said, adding that he and Beechler also are taking a correspondence course to be certified as a veterinarian’s assistant.

Smith said the Capital City Obedience Club recently donated \$500 to the shelter, and a member who is a professional dog groomer has volunteered to teach the inmates dog-grooming and obedience techniques.

Lorena said the center will be classified as a “no-kill shelter,” with the staff working hard to make sure all of the animals suitable as pets are adopted.