

Baltimore Guide

It's not the ark, but it does move animals toward new homes

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9 a.m. Nichole Miller's van is gassed-up and ready for its rounds. Miller, the Maryland SPCA's transport coordinator and behavioral assistant, makes the rounds of various shelters several times a week, searching out dogs and cats that have been turned in recently. Those whom she thinks might make good candidates for the SPCA's adoption program, she brings back to SPCA's Hampden campus.



Dusty gets a checkup from Terrice Brown, right.

The trip is a little less stressful for the animals in her care because the van is new, purchased recently with donated funds and customized for transporting animals. The new van is the link between homeless animals and the SPCA, and from there, new homes.

Miller comes out of the SPCA headquarters leading a spotted pit bull mix, the first passenger of the day. He's heading back to the Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter, where volunteers will try to find him a home. Miller slides open the door of the van to reveal a retrofitted kennel setup. She boosts the dog into the vehicle, then guides him into a waiting cage. That done, she slides the door closed and climbs in the front.

The vehicle is set up with a wall between animals and driver. "We used to be in all one space," Miller explains, leaning back to check on the dog's condition through a connecting window. "That could get REALLY noisy and smelly, though." She laughs. "This one is air-conditioned and heated for all of us, but we're in separate sections."

9:25 a.m. Miller navigates the van through the morning traffic toward South Baltimore and BARCS. She has been involved in the SPCA's transport program for three years, and has worked for the SPCA since her college years.

While working part-time in the kennel, Miller became interested in animal behavior—how to evaluate it, what it means and so on. And since all dogs and cats must pass an evaluation in order to be put into the adoption program, it is essential that the behavioral assessment be accurate.

Her behavioral interests that led Miller to the transport program. Here, she must make assessments quickly and be able to decide which animals to move to the SPCA.

“Transporting is a lot of fun,” she now says, pulling into the lot near BARCS, retrieving the pitbull mix and taking him inside.

Miller makes two to three trips to BARCS per week. Mondays are her busiest days because so many animals are surrendered to shelters over the weekend. Animals surrendered by their owners are safe bets for evaluation because the owners have plenty of information on their behavior and medical history.

“BARCS has a lot of animals because they get a lot of strays and a lot of surrenders,” she says, “and we like to help move some of the animals out so that they can have empty cages to fill up.”

She's not exaggerating about the shelter's population. In a press release issued by BARCS, executive director Jennifer Mead notes that “on Thursday, May 14 alone, we took in 62 cats and kittens and 17 dogs. This is just one example of the high volumes of animals we receive every day.”

In addition to being a rescue and adoption center on its own, BARCS works with other shelters such as the Maryland SPCA, and looks for foster homes to help socialize some animals and make them better candidates for adoption.

Now, Miller stops in front of a run within BARCS and examines a Rottweiler. The dog looks up at her with a quizzical expression.

“Let's look at her,” says Miller, reading the dog's chart. She and BARCS workers lead the dog to another room. Miller sits down beside the dog and rubs her head, checks her teeth, then lifts a paw. She passes her hands over the dog's body while the dog wags her stubby tail.

“Basically, I'm looking for a dog that is friendly and motivated,” she says. “If a dog does well, she can come with me.”

The Rottie passes muster. A few more passes through the kennels turn up two more dogs, both new arrivals. One is a brown-haired, medium-sized dog with a few bald patches that Miller frowns at; the other is a long, low dog covered with mats of pale colored hair. They get a ride in the van too.

Nichole shifts her attention to the cats. Many cages contain mother cats and kittens but, she explains, because they are under eight weeks of age, the kittens are too young to leave their mothers just yet.

Kittens present their own problems to shelters. In addition to increasing the population quickly and exponentially, they are immediately more in demand, meaning that adult cats get fewer chances for adoption. Many shelters, including the SPCA and BARCS begin running 'cat fire sales,' or discounted adoption programs of adult animals, to help move them to new homes.

10:15 a.m. Miller walks through the cat rooms, pulling cards off of the cages of cats she wants to examine.

"The main thing is that they're healthy and friendly," she says, bending down to look at two cats who were surrendered together. One comes to the front of the cage. The other backs up, looking wary.

Two cats that already get along well can be put into the SPCA's cat condos, large enclosures with doors that allow the cats to wander through different rooms and levels. She moves the cats to carriers, then circulates through the rooms again, identifying her other picks, then examining and approving them.

10:45 a.m. Miller works with BARCS officials to make sure all paperwork is filled out and heads back toward the SPCA. She calls en route to let them know about her passenger load.

11:15 a.m. Back at the SPCA, Miller leads the matted, pale-colored dog into an exam room where veterinary assistant Terrice Brown begins checking him over, looks for a microchip, then administers distemper and bordatella vaccines.

"Ticks," says Brown, combing through the dog's hair.

"I know," Miller sighs. "He's infested."



Dusty, after getting a bath and a shave and losing his ticks, is ready for adoption.

That dog is led away for treatment and the next one, the Rottie, is brought in, wagging enthusiastically.

Miller watches the dog and the staff together. Once the dogs have received their initial exams and vaccines, they'll be bathed, have a full exam and evaluation, and eventually, will be placed on the adoption floor. The cats will also receive exams and evaluation.

The goal is to put the animals up for adoption as soon as possible.

The dog with the balding patches is brought in. Tests reveal he has sarcoptic mange, or scabies. Once the dog has gotten its vaccinations and an exam, he is led out and everyone in the exam room scrubs and sterilizes their hands.

Next: the cats. She checks her watch and decides she's on track for her next appointment: a stop at the Baltimore County Animal Shelter. Last year, she moved over 1,000 animals to the SPCA from various other organizations. This year, she's on track to surpass that number.

"This is fun," she says as she walks back out toward the van, "but the hardest thing is that you want to save everyone. You just have to do the best you can."

Note: For information on adoptable animals at the SPCA, call 410-285-8826, or go to www.mdspca.org. For information on adoptable animals at BARCS, or on fostering animals, call 410-396-4695, or go to www.baltimoreanimalshelter.org.

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