

How to Become an Animal Control Officer

Discover what skills and training are essential to master the duties of an animal control officer.

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Animal control officers need more than just a catchpole and a crate. Their job requires a complex blend of skills – including the ability to handle animals safely and skillfully, and to navigate emotionally charged situations with people.

Charged with the dual roles of protecting the public, as well as animals themselves, officers deal with a dazzling number of scenarios. They capture dangerous animals that may cause a safety hazard. To ensure animals are cared for properly, they inspect related businesses such as pet shops, grooming kennels, and circuses. As part of public outreach, they often provide education on the importance of spaying and neutering, offer advice on behavioral problems, and promote adoption.

On the legal front, animal control officers enforce all local, state, and some federal codes involving animals.

“In situations where animals are mistreated, officers may file charges against the offender and testify in court as expert witnesses,” says Misha Goodman, director of the Iowa City-Coralville Animal Care and Adoption Center and former president of the National Animal Control Association. “They may respond to very dangerous animal violations such as dogfighting investigations.”

Officers often start their careers by getting experience dealing with animals as a shelter volunteer, or working in a vet office or kennel.

“Some study animal science or criminal justice as a prerequisite,” Goodman says, noting that the general minimum hire age for an officer is 21. “Some will attend national training like the National Animal Control Association training to become a certified officer in the field,” a requirement in many states.

In addition to knowing how to capture and handle a wide variety of animals – including marine animals, wildlife, and exotics – advanced officers have training and certification in euthanasia, chemical immobilization (safely immobilizing animals for capture), CPR, first aid, large-animal capture, disaster sheltering, animal-behavioral evaluation, and cruelty investigation.

With such wide-ranging duties, animal control officers need to think on their feet.

“Officers never know what kind of situation may occur,” Goodman says.

For their safety – and that of those around them – problem solving in difficult situations is perhaps their most powerful asset.

To see what a typical day on the job is like for animal control officer Misha Goodman, pick up the January 2008 issue of DOG FANCY.