

Animal House 2.0

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor; Photos by Silvia Ros
September 2016

Miami-Dade County's new, high-tech animal shelter is finally open for dogs and cats and you



On June 13, a sweltering Monday, some 300 people have made the trip to Doral and are waiting in the shade and under tents for the media ritual to begin. Large fans keep the air circulating, and volunteers hand out water bottles to politicians, reporters and camera crews, friends, and supporters.

But the close-up that matters most belongs to the converted warehouse behind them, its façade wrapped in a mesh-metal sleeve decorated with giant cat and dog-shaped cut-outs designed by New York artist David Brooks.

A dozen or more silhouettes, the very shapes that filled the cut-outs below, line the rooftop in various poses of rest or play. People marvel like tourists, snapping photos and taking in the whimsy of the frieze and façade.

It's opening day for the brand-new Miami-Dade Pet Adoption and Protection Center, a day many people in this crowd have waited years to see. After 40 years, the old county-run shelter,

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at 7401 NW 74th St. in Medley, closed its doors on Wednesday, June 8. Over the past three days, the animals housed there were transferred here to their new digs just a five-minute, 2.8-mile drive south on the Palmetto Expressway.

The mammoth structure for the Miami-Dade Animal Services Department sits on 4.79 acres, with lots of parking, at 3599 NW 79th Ave. The building was gutted and retrofitted for the new animal protection center. Construction took two years. That was the easy part.

To illustrate how bad things were before the project got under way in 2004 with a county general-obligation bond setting aside \$7 million for a new shelter, here are reviews from the two people who served as Animal Services' directors at the old facility:

"Medley was a depressing facility," says Alex Muñoz, the current director and former county assistant manager. "The smell was just awful."



Sara Pizano, a veterinarian and Muñoz's predecessor in the position, minces no words. "An atrocity of a shelter," she calls it.

Staff morale was low. There was no air-conditioning in the kennels. Clinic, surgery, and recovery spaces were cramped. Animals were routinely killed due to lack of space -- as many as 11,000 cats in 2010, according to Muñoz.

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Adoptable cats were kept in small metal cages; feral cats were euthanized as soon as they were brought in. Conditions were so wretched; it was hard to keep volunteers.

Before 2005, Animal Services didn't even exist as a stand-alone department, with its own budget and staff. It had started out as a division of Public Works until 2001, when it was absorbed into the Miami-Dade Police Department.

"Animal Services was an afterthought within another department," explains county Commissioner Sally Heyman, who represents District 4, northeast Miami-Dade. "At that time, it was considered a punishment detail to work there."

Those days should be behind us, just judging by the building's appearance. Back at the opening-day ceremonies, it's time for speeches from the local brass, led by director Muñoz.

"Completion of this new Pet Adoption and Protection Center is an important achievement in our continued efforts to increase spay/neuter services," he says, "since it increases surgical capacity by more than 50 percent. Accessible and affordable spay-neuter surgeries are an important component in the efforts toward no-kill goals."

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