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South Suburban Humane Society calls new facility a game changer

BY ERIC CRUMP
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The South Suburban Humane Society's move from a cramped building next to railroad tracks in Chicago Heights to a spacious new facility next to prairie land in Matteson is a game changer, according to SSSH board member Heather McNitt.

She was giving tours of the new shelter on Saturday, June 11, and "game changer" was her refrain while introducing each feature: adoption rooms, kennels designed for easy cleaning, a meet-and-greet room inside and a fenced patio meet-and-greet space outside, a cat room with adjoining outside "catio," a walking trail through open prairie land, adjacent veterinary clinic and spay and neuter center.

The term is apt, especially for anyone who has visited the previous facility. Not only was the Chicago Heights shelter much smaller, but not all services could be located there. Veterinary and spay and neuter services were housed in separate locations. Now, everything is on the same campus, and everything is bigger and better designed to serve people and animals in the new space, McNitt said.

The grand opening event was designed to introduce the community to the new facility and let people mingle among adoptable cats and dogs.

The "ribbon cutting" ceremony on Thursday, June 9, brought together key county and municipal officials who helped make the new building possible. In consideration of the SSSH

mission, officials broke a giant dog biscuit rather than cutting a ribbon.

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, 6th District Cook County Commissioner Donna Miller, Matteson Village President Sheila Chalmers-Currin and SSSH CEO Emily Klehm all delivered remarks at that celebration.

"The Southland has lacked a facility of this caliber for a very long time, and it will be instrumental not only in housing lost animals, but reuniting lost pets with their families, and hopefully to adopt out new pets to their forever homes," Miller said. "Because of Emily's visionary leadership, this new facility has become a reality, and I am proud to support this amazing effort that will help our residents and our four-legged friends of the Southland."

The 19,000-square-foot shelter is the largest animal shelter in the Southland and can house 60 dogs and 75 cats.

McNitt said the reason the county funded the new building, contributing \$7 million to the project, was because of the need for SSSH services in the region and because the organization has a history of getting results with few resources.

"We bear the brunt of pet homelessness in the Chicago area," she said. "There are a lot of well-funded rescue places in the Chicagoland area. They operate on huge multi-million budgets. For a tenth of that cost, we save just as many animals per year."

"We've always been the little shelter that could. We're now going to be the medium shelter that could."



Eric Crump/H-F Chronicle
South Suburban Humane Society CEO Emily Klehm, fourth from right with scissors, cuts a ribbon on Saturday, June 11, to start the grand opening of the organization's new facility in Matteson.