

News

Blount Countians care for animals in extreme cold

By [Kristin Yarbrough](#)

Published in the [Blount Countian](#)

January 29, 2025

—

As Blount County faced another week of freezing temperatures, law enforcement officers, shelter staff, and residents worked to protect animals in life-threatening conditions.

In Oneonta, Chief of Police Charles Clifton urged consideration of the harsh weather. “We would only advise that pet owners be aware of the severe cold temperatures and make appropriate accommodations for their pets,” Clifton said, adding that owners should consider bringing their pets indoors.

Down the road at the Animal Adoption Center in Cleveland, kennel tech Dalton Stephens distributed wheat straw and doghouses to help families keep their pets warm. The supplies were donated by Tractor Supply Co., Blount County Farmers Co-Op, and community members, said Crystal Adams, a kennel tech at the shelter. An anonymous donor gave \$600 to be applied however could most effectively help. By last Thursday morning, all but a half-bale had been put to use.

Deputy Brock Echols, animal control officer at the Sheriff’s Office, continued his daily duties of responding to stray dogs reported across Blount County’s 650 square miles, while making himself available to assist animal owners in ensuring the safety of their animals. “He is out there doing his due diligence to make sure animals are protected,” said Sergeant Jason Paul, public information officer.

As Deputy Echols brought dogs to the Animal Adoption Center, staff hustled to care for an especially high number of animals. “We want people to bring them in,” said Karen Startley, shelter director. “We don’t want to see them freeze.” As of last Thursday morning, the shelter had already taken in 163 dogs and 32 cats in the month-to-date.

The large number of animals exacerbated the already difficult conditions. “The cold makes everything more challenging,” Adams said. Outdoor kennels were still being used to hold adult dogs during each morning’s deep cleaning of the indoor kennels, with staff mindful of minimizing the dogs’ exposure to the frigid air.

On social media, residents implored their neighbors to bring pets inside or to at least provide a well-insulated shelter. Offers of a warm room or garage were met with heart emojis and gratitude. In heavy circulation was a harrowing photo of a dog who froze to death on a chain in Sylacauga on Jan. 7, during the month’s first freezing temperatures.

“Dogs and cats need extra food and water this time of year,” said Adams, emphasizing that owners must ensure that water bowls remain ice-free. “They’re burning more calories to stay warm.”

Deprivation of necessary sustenance or shelter is a violation of Alabama's animal cruelty laws, which criminalize action or inaction that causes "unnecessary or unjustifiable pain or suffering." If the animal dies, the charge could be a felony, according to Birmingham police spokesman Sgt. Bryan Shelton, as quoted on AL.com.

Oneonta sometimes receives calls about unsheltered pets, said Police Chief Clifton, though he was not aware of any extra calls last week. If pets could not be brought inside, "Hay, straw, heat lights, blankets, and shelters should be considered," Clifton said.

Pine Mountain resident Kim Hall installed a heat lamp in her coop to warm the chickens and rabbits and to prevent the water bowl from freezing. Following a tip from other chicken keepers, Hall used petroleum jelly to prevent frostbite on her birds' combs and wattles, and kept the birds away from trees. "I recently read that the surface should be flat so that their feet are less exposed than if wrapped around a tree limb," Hall said.

A thrifted crockpot set on "keep warm" ensured drinkable water for Hall's dogs. Harley, a Great Pyrenees, was perfectly happy in the brisk air, Hall said, while her Pit-mix and Hound ventured outside only to quickly return to the warmth of the house.

Hall, who also provides pasture boarding for horses, strapped blankets onto a senior horse and onto two younger horses who are new to her facility. "They were stalled all their lives, so they didn't have a good winter coat," she explained. She kept plenty of hay available to the horses, since digestion generates internal warmth, and added salt to the horses' food to encourage hydration and prevent colic.

As the sun warmed the land last Wednesday, the animals were soaking it in, Hall said. She too, welcomed a thaw. "I'll bundle up to stay warm, but then I start sweating from running around," she said. "A hot shower will feel great!"

Fellow Pine Mountain resident Kathy Clements went to check on a little dog tied up in Center Point without shelter, water, or food, after learning about the situation from a friend. "He was there 15 minutes before I got there, and now he is gone," Kathy said, hoping that the dog had been brought to safety. "I try to ignore these posts and then they haunt me," she said of her Facebook feed's many reports about dogs.

Clements lined a tub with foam insulation and straw for an opossum that frequents her porch. She placed several similar tubs at the edge of the woods for other creatures who may need them. In the backyard, Clements filled plastic storage bins with straw for feral cats. Her goal is to trap the cats so that they can be sterilized, as she did with community cats near her previous home in Pinson, but these cats have evaded her traps thus far.

Back at the Animal Adoption Center, shelter volunteer and Tails from Alabama rescue founder Wendy Montealegre filmed Bubbles and Blossom, two-month-old puppies born to Weimaraner and French Bulldog parents. "We don't know if they'll be big or small," Montealegre wrote in their introductions. "But right now, they are 10 lbs. of squishy goodness!" Montealegre circulated the videos to nonprofit rescue groups and to community members to help the dogs find homes.

"While we've been able to secure rescue for many litters, there are times when we can't, which is heartbreaking," Montealegre said, urging pet owners to spay or neuter pets and

to honor their commitment to an animal's entire lifetime. "Every pet deserves to be part of the family — not left outside in a kennel or on a chain."

Copyright © BlountAnimals.com
About | Contact | Shelter Data