



No More Homeless Pets Forum
July 28 2003

Hard-to-place Animals

What about the big black dogs? The really shy cats? Nathan Winograd of Tompkins County SPCA will share his secrets to finding homes for the truly tough-to-adopt animals.

Questions

Trying to be no-kill when faced with overwhelming number of calls

Placing pitbulls

Adopting out "aggressive" dogs

Finding homes for FeLV positive cats

What about when the local shelter won't work with rescues to place animals?

How do you explain an animal's special need to a potential adopter?

Adopting out pairs of animals

What to do when animals have been in the shelter for a long time

Pitbull article Nathan wrote to his local paper

Eliminating the old school thought and ushering in No More Homeless Pets

Saving money and saving lives

Using liability and unions as a way to not work with rescues

I'm an individual who took on a difficult foster dog and am drained

Avoiding the disgruntled employee label when you point out problems in the shelter

Putting labels on dogs: "Bad with kids", "Adult home only"



Nathan Winograd

Trying to be no-kill when faced with overwhelming number of calls

Question from Kathy:

Our no-kill organization's definition of "adoptable" is "a dog or cat that poses no health or safety risk which makes it unsuitable for placement in a home". We do everything medically possible to treat sick and injured dogs and cats as well as to help behaviorally challenged animals. We once placed a litter of 7 kittens, 4 of which had to have both eyes removed and 3 of which lost one eye. We have cancer-ridden and old diabetic dogs. Obviously, vet care gets expensive. However, these animals also keep many donors contributing. Since ours is a foster home network, we sometimes find ourselves overloaded with animals waiting to become healthy or well-trained.

The San Francisco SPCA and Maddie's Fund seem to have set the standard and become models for the no-kill movement. It is my understanding that San Francisco reached no-kill status by euthanizing any animal that couldn't be spayed/neutered, vetted and out the door. Maddie's Fund no-kill guidelines defines adoptable as "healthy", going on to state they will "...then focus its resources on funding programs to rehabilitate the sick, injured and poorly behaved..." I can't agree with this route to reach no-kill, nor will our group start euthanizing without trying to help the animals that come into our adoption program. But I reluctantly understand this philosophy in communities that have huge animal overpopulations. We have an estimated 70,000 free-roaming cats. (Collaborative efforts have been underway for a year now with aggressive spay/neuter clinics, together with TNR and programs to help low-income families.)

Our organization's spay/neuter programs, adoptions, foster families and finances have increased every year. I'd like to believe that we can still help sick, injured and poorly behaved animals, but am very disheartened to turn other animals away, healthy or not, because of a low bank balance or unavailable foster homes. With all of that said, how or when does one draw the line or reach a balance without adopting the above stated no-kill philosophy when faced with overwhelming calls for help?

Response from Nathan:

First, let's dump the word "adoptable". At a recent American Humane Association conference, one SPCA actually admitted that what they claim is "adoptable" changes depending on how much space they have at their shelter. In that way, they can save all the "adoptable" animals, even while killing pets during peak capacity that would be saved during slower times of the year. It is a misrepresentation to the public, and a betrayal to the animals.

In addition, too many shelters that are killing too many animals try to hide the slaughter by overly restrictive definitions of adoptable. Despite that killing rose in one American city by 4% in a year and over 70% of the animals entering that shelter system were being killed, the shelter was claiming it was saving "most adoptable animals." Outrageous.

The term "adoptable" is too fuzzy and too capable of misuse. The bottom line for the no-kill movement is how many animals are going home alive into loving homes. That, in my view, is the best measure of how we are doing as a shelter and as a community.

But that doesn't mean that categories and definitions are not important. Categorizing animals is important in order to align one's strategies to the task at hand. Without an understanding of how many animals are healthy vs. sick or injured, or have behavior problems, it is impossible to determine where to put your resources. For example, let's say a community takes in 5,000 animals. What should we do to increase lifesaving in that community? Should we do more off-site adoption events? Should the shelter open on weekends? That sounds good, except if 1,000 are feral cats, then off-site adoption events and longer shelter hours won't help. They need spay/neuter and advocacy. If another 1,000 are neonatal kittens, they need foster care, not weekend shelter hours. If another 1,000 are dogs with behavior problems, they need socialization and behavior training, otherwise some will get adopted, but most will be returned. Once you categorize animals, you can then put into place targeted and effective strategies to save lives.

The categories that matter are:

- healthy animals
- sick/injured but treatable animals
- dogs with treatable behavior problems
- non-rehabilitatable injuries, illness or behavior
- feral cats

As an aside, I do not speak for Maddie's Fund, but the intimation in the question is so far off the mark it deserves comment. Maddie's Fund is NOT advocating that sick or injured animals be killed - far from it. But since they are focusing on entire communities, it doesn't make sense to fund saving injured animals when healthy animals are still being killed. When that animal becomes healthy, there is no guarantee he will be saved, or that he won't displace another healthy animal who is killed in his place. What I believe Maddie's is trying to do is create communities with the infrastructure to save all healthy animals (adoption programs, spay/neuter programs, etc.) so that when they invest in animals who are ill or injured, the money used to treat those pets will result in a healthy animal who will be guaranteed a home. Again, I do not work for them or speak for them, but from my point of view, it makes perfect sense.

That aside, the question is posed as follows: "how or when does one draw the line or reach a balance ... when faced with overwhelming calls for help?" What I think she is asking is "when is it ok to turn animals away?" or "when is it ok to kill animals?"

My gut answer is simple: never accept an animal you have no hope of saving. The notion that a private rescue group or SPCA should kill animals on behalf of the public is so ludicrous as to be beyond comment. We are here for the animals, and if you can't save an animal, you are not protecting them. The warped notion that private organizations should kill animals because someone says there are too many is outrageous and intolerable. Do what you can, while you strategically increase your capacity to help so you can help more animals over time. You don't help animals over the long term by going broke or burning out or taking in too many and killing the excess. A private SPCA or rescue group should never kill an animal for space. NEVER.

So focus on those animals you can save. And work to increase your capacity for lifesaving. How do you do that? First of all, stop lamenting the "bad public" and start taking responsibility for the animals. They are depending on you. To do that, ignore the myths and lies that we have accepted as gospel for too long. The first is that there are "too many animals and not enough homes." My favorite is the answer most often given to every reporter's question: "Why do you kill animals in your shelter?" The answer often heard is that "for every three animals we get in, we adopt one, you do the math". Type in "you do the math" at www.google.com and you'll get 48 hits from shelter directors across the country trying to deflect blame for their failure to achieve lifesaving results. There are others: "If you increase the quantity of homes, we have to reduce the quality;" "You can't find homes for older animals, sick animals and those with special needs;" "We must kill because the public is bad." Take responsibility!

The second thing any organization should do is to ensure its programs and services are accountable to the animals. To do that, an organization should focus its resources on those programs that have measurable results and dump those that do not. In Tompkins County, we achieved accountability by eliminating programs that did not save lives and eliminating unnecessary positions and overhead.

Unless you are swimming in money, cut all the programs that do not have an immediate lifesaving impact. Use the

money you save for all those programs you currently claim you cannot afford (like 100% spay/neuter of animals before adoption, like surgery for injured animals, like a dog trainer to turn terrified dogs into trusting loving pets).

In Tompkins County, we have an executive director, a director of operations, a shelter manager, a development director, a spay/neuter coordinator, a volunteer coordinator, a humane education director, a vet tech, four kennel staff, four and 1/2 front desk people, and two humane officers. We eliminated the shelter manager position, the spay/neuter coordinator, the volunteer coordinator, two kennel positions, two 1/2 front desk positions. We then increased our volunteer force to fill in the gaps.

We also eliminated the two programs that do not save the lives of animals: humane education and animal assisted therapy. Accountability can be summed up as follows: If I do X program, how many animals will it save? Humane education has no answer. There is not a single study out there showing it has made a damn bit of difference. There is no accountability in humane ed or animal assisted therapy. Dump them and use the money for programs that get results.

In the end, by eliminating staff and programs that did not impact the bottom line (saving lives), the TC SPCA was able to afford a lot of programs and services we couldn't before. We 1) hired a dog trainer; 2) went from sterilizing 10% of shelter animals before adoption to 100%; 3) started a TNR program with free spay/neuter for feral cats; and 4) provide surgery and other medical procedures to injured pets. And there's more. In short, we reduced the death rate by 75% at the same time we trimmed over \$100,000 from our budget, and nearly doubled our average gift.

Is it expensive to save lives? "Yes" is only part of the answer. Surgery costs money, but in the end, saving lives is cost-effective. If you cut wasteful staff and programs, you'll have the extra revenue for spay/neuter, medical care, adoption incentives and other truly lifesaving programs. So you can spend more effectively and save more lives. And, your donations will increase because the public will support you when you demonstrate that you can get results, and that you will use their money wisely.

You can also do a lot to save animals, to adopt more animals, without spending any money. First of all, you need to adopt out animals into quality homes as quickly as possible. How do you do that? There are a lot of low- to no-cost ways of doing that: foster homes are my favorite. On average, one out of three TC SPCA pets goes through foster care (over 800 per year). And since foster parents pay for food and litter, it doesn't cost the shelter anything while foster parents are helping you adopt them out through their jobs, at off-site adoption events, from your website, or adopting them themselves.

There is also what I like to call "public access adoption hours"--shelter hours when working people and families can visit, such as weekends. This doesn't necessarily mean more hours, which can drive up costs, only different ones. Instead of being open 9 to 5, when most people are at work, open later in the day say 12 to 6 or so. Close on Monday, and open on Saturday - same hours and better access means more adoptions.

Take the animals to where people work, live and play through volunteer-organized off-site adoption events. We attend church bazaars, neighborhood fairs, store openings, we even attended a car sales event! If people won't come to the shelter, take the animals to them.

We use breed rescue groups for all our purebred animals so we can give our shepherd-mixes a better chance. We have excellent adoption incentives:

- free health exam at any local vet
- free grooming
- 10% discount at pet supply store
- free dog behavior advice for life
- free month of dog doo doo pick up
- free Pet I.D. tag
- free doggy wash at local pet salon
- 10% discount at puppy class
- 10% discount for pet massage
- Pet Lover's Guide to New Pet
- free bag of goodies
- free bag of pet food
- periodically: free video, free Kong
- free collars/leashes, etc.

None of this costs us anything. We also are out there publicizing our shelter and our animals through press releases, articles, letters to the editor, PSAs on the radio. Last year, despite an advertising budget of zero, we had 383 total stories on the radio, television or our local paper (an average of 32 stories per month)! This keeps people thinking about the shelter and adopting out your animals.

And the more animals you save, the more you can tell your community about it, and the more they'll support you financially. That's just the tip of the iceberg.

You can save the lives at risk. Each and every healthy, sick and injured but treatable, pet will find a home. Your job is to manipulate time, space and resources to give each animal a chance. If you are leveraging all your resources, the death rate in your community will plummet quickly--and you can save more and more lives.

Placing pitbulls

Question from Becky in IN:

I run a municipal dog pound in a small, rural town. I can keep the dogs there until they find a home. I've had a wonderful female full-blood pitbull for over 6 months. She is the most gentle and intelligent dog I've ever worked with, but of course, when people hear she's a pitbull, they won't even give her a look. I'm about ready to tell people she's a strange-looking poodle mix. How do you market the bully breeds and get past their reputations? Thanks so much for any advice.

Response from Nathan:

Each one of our pitbulls is an ambassador for the breed. So, to make it into our adoption program, the pitbull must be of good temperament. I don't care if she pees in the house, poops in your shoes, or has no manners and knocks over the kids--so long as she is friendly, we will find her a home.

Aggression of any kind in a pitbull is unfair to the friendly pitbulls who are looking for homes while suffering from a bad reputation. So make sure any pitbull you make available for adoption is a sweetheart. And no names like Rocko of Capone. I like "Daisy" "Sweetpea", that sort of thing.

Here is an actual pet of the week ad from a local SPCA in central NY regarding a pitbull: "Capone. Male Pitbull. Does NOT get along with other dogs, cats or children and is afraid of strangers. Come meet Capone today." What does this say about pitbulls? What is the average family thinking about pitbulls? It is that they are aggressive to dogs, to cats, to kids. They even named him after a gangster. It makes no sense to me. They aren't saving all pitbulls, let alone all dogs, so why not try and save the friendly ones first?

A sweet pitbull who is adopted will spend the rest of her life showing people in your community how friendly and sweet pitbulls are. Without any effort or expense on your part. That will make all subsequent pitbulls easier to adopt and increase the number of people willing to give the breed a chance.

In addition, you should also be promoting the breed in your community. When two pitbulls were implicated in the killing of a person here, I wrote an article in our local paper on how pitbulls had an unfair reputation. I talked about how Petey, the dog from the Little Rascals, was a pitbull, how the most decorated dog in U.S. military history was a pitbull, how Helen Keller had one true love in her life, her pitbull. I talked about how the pitbull was once the most popular dog in the U.S. precisely because they were good with children and of excellent temperament. I talked about how, unfortunately, pitbulls have become the thug's dog of choice, but that is not a fault of the breed. That, at one time or another, it was other breeds like Dobermans or German shepherd or rottweilers, but that any dog, raised without love, can turn out vicious. I also talked about how we help ensure all our pitbulls are friendly. Our ads promoting dogs include pitbulls kissing kids or a kid with a grin from ear to ear hugging a pit. It is a process of turning their image around, while you promote the individual, friendly pits in your shelter.

Since you know pitbulls may have a longer average length of stay, use foster homes, use adoption incentives (like free pet food for 6 months, free collar and leash, etc.), use the time to teach them basic commands or tricks to make them even more adoptable. And have volunteers available to answer questions and promote the breed. Create literature on the issue. Spread the truth. It may take a little longer, but the results are well worth it. Last year, we saved 100% of all healthy and friendly pitbulls, and 86% overall after screening out aggression.

Comment from Holly:

Thank you for your excellent reply to this question. I know that Best Friends lists its available pit bulls and mixes on pitbull rescue central (www.pbrc.net). This is an excellent resource for posting available dogs, as well as a good source of breed information for shelters, rescues and potential adopters of these dogs. They are not for everyone, so it's important to educate.

Adopting out "aggressive" dogs

Question from Crystal:

I am part of a group that has recently formed within a rescue to place dogs that have been in the organization for way too long without getting adopted. This organization regularly holds adoption fairs, but some of these dogs can't come because of their various issues (adoption day stress, biting, separation anxiety, dog-aggressive, etc.) We've been trying to come up with approaches on how to find the right homes for them and to get them exposure.

What kind of approaches do you take to place dog-aggressive dogs, biters, etc. in the appropriate homes?

Response from Nathan:

This is a difficult question for me, not because marketing shelter animals, particularly those with special impediments to adoptions, is hard or because finding homes for pets with problems is hard—but because it's not. This question is difficult because of the underlying assumptions here about dogs with aggression. Although the question does not pose a response to the latter, I am going to tackle it anyway at the end.

Let me start out with the actual question posed. Adopting out "hard to place" animals has six steps. Repeating the first two, which I mentioned in a prior response, are: 1) take responsibility by shattering the myths; and 2) make your programs and services accountable to the animals by cutting waste in staff and programs that do not impact the bottom line, which is saving lives. I won't repeat those here.

The third step is to implement programs for pet retention to keep these animals from entering the shelter in the first place. Things like free pet behavior advice (you can use volunteers or fanciers in your community at no cost). Our two cat experts, for example, are Sandy "Cat Woman" Snyder and Bob "Mr. Litterbox" Sherwood. Their expertise comes from working with our shelter animals. As far as I know, they have never received formal training, but no one can talk and resolve litter box problems like Bob or resolve behavior problems like Sandy. You foster a couple hundred cats and you figure it out. Use them with people who want to surrender animals and you'll find fewer coming in with problems so you can focus more and invest more on those already there. Also, create special funds and programs (remember you are saving money and reducing overall expenses by eliminating humane ed and excess staff, and you're also increasing donations by fundraising and good public relations) to help people, such as free or low-cost spay/neuter, a medical fund, documents to help people find homes for their pets rather than surrender them to the shelter. Provide rental listings on your website for landlords who allow pets, promote pro-pet businesses. That's the sort of stuff that causes people to surrender pets in the first place.

The next step, in my view, is to have a comprehensive adoption program. Each and every pet available for adoption is on our website with pictures and blurbs. If they are in foster homes, there is a link to the foster parent's e-mail. We also use petfinder.com, 1.800.Save-A-Pet, and other adoption networks. We use rescue groups, have lots of adoption incentives, attend all kinds of special events, use over 800 foster homes annually, and are open seven days a week, all in an effort to get animals adopted. We create flyers for special cases and mail them to our supporters. We send out e-mails to hundreds of people with a picture. We have an e-newsletter in addition to the traditional print one. We do a "pet of the week" on our local T.V. news and our local newspaper. There are many ways to "show" your pets, especially those with problems that may not show well at an off-site adoption event or the shelter.

The fifth step is presentation. Keep it common. A dog named "Buddy" will get adopted quicker than a dog named "Karma". Keep it current. "Harry Potter" will get adopted quicker than a pet named "Harry Truman". A pitbull? No names like Rocko or Capone. Try "Daisy" or "Sweetpea" instead. You can add color through bandanas. You can create stories to help pets find homes. Each and every pet has one. We had a cat named Tippy who sat at our shelter for three months. He was a nice enough cat, but - no offense to Tippy - your run-of-the-mill, middle-aged, black, adult cat. So, we made him a pet of the week. What was his story? How he has sat at the shelter for three months watching kittens come and go in a day. We wrote it in the first person. It was called "Tippy's Lament". It went like this: "17-C, that's my official SPCA number. What that means is that I am the 17th cat to come in this year, way back on January 8. That makes me the longest-term guest at the SPCA. I am full of fine manners and am very friendly, but keep getting passed over. The SPCA is already in the mid-300s for cats, which means I have sat here while over 300 cats have come and gone. The good folks at the SPCA think I deserve a chance too, so they have waived all my fees for the right home. They'll even throw in a free bag of cat food and a free visit to the Tompkins County veterinarian of your choice. Come meet me - "Tippy" - a fine fellow down on his luck."

Six people showed up that day for Tippy, and he was adopted out the first hour we were open. It's all about the story. If the pet doesn't have one, create one.

We also try to get the dogs out of their runs four times a day - for walks, for off-leash play, for dog-dog play, so that they are tired and calm when people come into the shelter. Our dogs don't bark and they don't jump up. They are exhausted. Literally. Our kennel area is quiet. The dogs show better; bigger dogs get adopted quicker; and people stay longer. We also let the dogs sell themselves. Encourage people to walk them, to throw a ball with them in the backyard, to jump into the kiddie pools. The same goes with cats. We set up baby gates and let people play with them in the cat room. On a Saturday, there are kids and cats everywhere. Make the shelter experience fun!

The sixth step is to promote them (though we touched on this a bit with Tippy). We do radio public service announcements, articles in the paper, pets of the week, press releases, posters in windows, newsletters, get the message and the pet out. When jammed, get creative. We had a dozen beagles in our shelter once, and they were all adopted in a weekend by promoting a contest of what was better, Beagles or Bagels? We had all these reasons why beagles were better than bagels and even offered all adopters of beagles a dozen bagels. It was silly, it made no sense, and it was picked up by every radio station, T.V. station and newspaper in the area. It made its rounds on e-mails. It worked! Have fun while you promote the hell out of your animals.

Although the question didn't ask for my view, I do want to address the issue of a shelter adopting out "biters" and other "aggressive" dogs. At the TC SPCA, we screen out aggression. We use a very rigorous and fair process, including the use of a veterinarian specializing in behavior medicine, to make sure dogs are truly aggressive and have a poor prognosis for rehabilitation. But we do not adopt out aggressive dogs. Even with that policy (which includes animal control contracts), we are still saving 93% of all homeless dogs in our community, better than anyone else in the U.S.

I do not believe it is fair to animals and to the community to put an aggressive dog out there. I don't expect everyone to agree with this or even accept it on a personal level. But I hope people can see the sincerity in my belief, based on adopting out thousands of dogs, that keeping aggression out of your adoption program is what I believe will save the largest number of dogs over the long term and keep adopters coming back for the untrained, sick, and compromised, though friendly, shepherd mixes who rely on the public to give them a second and sometimes third chance at life.

Most people might argue that this view is overly strict to the dogs. It isn't. Most communities are killing dogs for space (we do not), if they are not adopted in an arbitrary time frame (we do not), for treatable medical reasons (we do not), and for treatable behavior problems (we do not). What we screen out is aggression where the prognosis is poor. Tompkins County is the safest community in the U.S. to be a homeless dog or cat. We find homes for 13-year-old beagles, three legged dogs, blind cats, and a whole host of animals who need serious intervention before they go home and even afterward, including surgery. Many of our dogs are older, not housetrained; some have medical problems. In order to keep adopters coming back to the shelter, I believe we need to screen out aggression in dogs. Our friendly but compromised dogs deserve every consideration for life. And we just lose adoptions, and support, when aggressive dogs slip through the cracks. If there is another community who has a better way of doing it, I'd like to hear about it. But I would not put a dog with demonstrated aggression into the community, where the prognosis for rehabilitation is poor.

Comment from Shannon:

Another suggestion for dogs that don't "show well" at adoption events is to have a photo album with their pictures and bios. It is very important that the people working the booth at the event have knowledge of the animal of interest. If someone is interested enough, they will contact the organization after the event for information and a meeting with the animal of interest. We have had success using the photo book. I was the foster person of a "hard to place dog", as he was returned from 2 homes and had to be moved to more than one foster home because of differences of opinions between him and the resident dogs, and his idiosyncrasies with human actions (like quick movements and reaching for him too quickly). He eventually found his forever home through an adoption event.

Finding homes for FeLV positive cats

Question from Patti:

I am a board member and foster for a very small cat/kitten rescue group that just got started. We are in the process of developing policies and procedures. A question has come up about what to do if we take in a cat/kitten that tests positive for FeLV. We doubt any of the present foster homes could take it due to the exposure to the other cats/kittens in the home. Do you have any suggestions as how to adopt a cat/kitten out that tests positive so we could save their life?

Response from Nathan:

We have had some success adopting out FeLV+ cats, but the majority of them are unfortunately still killed here. When one talks about no-kill, we are talking about saving 100% of healthy dogs and cats, 100% of sick and injured but treatable dogs and cats, and I know I am a minority in this viewpoint, but I would also add 100% of feral cats. That is the goal. When we reach that goal, in my view, you reach a no-kill community. In a no-kill community, the animals who are still being killed are those that are sick or injured, with a poor prognosis, or vicious dogs.

Since FeLV+ cats have an illness that could affect others and the prognosis for recovery is poor, they are by definition, non-rehabilitatable. That doesn't mean you don't try to save them. You do. But if you cannot, you have not betrayed your goal of a no-kill community.

Personally, I would not test for FeLV - the costs of testing are great and the incidence of the virus is low (1-2%). If we get a positive saliva test, we need to blood-test to prevent killing false positive cats. If adopters are concerned, they can do the test at their own veterinarian's and return positive cats, and that money is better spent on spay/neuter which would reduce transmission (bites and births). But the Committee of the Board that helps monitor vaccination protocols insists we do so. With two veterinarians on that committee, it is a battle I do not wish to wage. So be it. We do. We do saliva screen for FeLV. All saliva-positive cats are then blood-tested to ensure a true positive. FeLV positive cats are often killed, but not as a matter of policy. We have been able to adopt some, but, unfortunately, not all.

Your concerns about bringing them into contact with your own or foster cats are not out of bounds, although our vet tells us that transmission between kittens is extremely difficult.

The larger issue here is where the shelter is in terms of its feline lifesaving. If the humane society in your community is still killing healthy cats, bottle-feeding kittens, kittens with URI, ringworm kittens, cats with treatable injuries like broken bones, etc., trying to save FeLV-positive cats is laudable, but shouldn't be your first priority.

I am a firm believer in working your way strategically to saving the most lives. First, save all healthy animals. If your shelter is still killing healthy animals, why invest in medical care? Once the animal gets better, the animal still faces a risk of being killed or may displace another healthy cat who will be killed. So, start out with healthy cats. Saving all healthy cats ensures you have the infrastructure and policies to begin saving sick and injured but treatable cats, so that once they get better, they can be guaranteed a loving, new home. In addition, it is important to set these types of initial goals (healthy animals first) so that you have some success, so that you have measurable impact, and so that the community can support the next round of lifesaving.

In Tompkins County, our first goal was saving 100% of healthy animals. Once we did that, and shared our success with the community, we asked for their support in saving sick and injured but treatable animals (a more costly undertaking because of medical and behavior rehabilitation costs such as staff, medication, surgery, etc.). We used our success in saving healthy animals as a springboard to more challenging cases, and the public supported us. First, it was medical care for URI and ringworm animals, and then on to more and more complicated cases, such as Hit By Car dogs and cats with multiple medical problems.

When we finished the year saving 100% of these animals as well, we knew we could turn to the community for more challenging scenarios, since they knew we would use their donations wisely and for the benefits of the animals. If your community is still killing healthy animals, it might not be the most prudent thing to try and save a 9-year old dog with a mammary tumor and cataracts. Investing in that dog could save a dozen puppies instead. But, because the puppies were being saved anyway, we asked the community to send us money for medical care and to help us place the older, compromised dogs and cats--and they do. And we save them.

The whole point is to work your way up the pyramid. Once you save healthy animals, then save sick cats with relatively easy issues like ringworm, URI, or bottle feeders. As you save these, you can move on to broken bones, etc. Once you are saving healthy and treatable cats, the next frontier is obviously more challenging cases--like FeLV, cancers, etc. That makes more sense to me community-wide.

But, far be it for me to tell a rescue group not to save whomever they want to save. I believe that rescue groups can and should pick and choose whom they want to save. The challenge with FeLV+ cats is to turn their image around. That image being that they are all going to suffer and die, or that they will infect other cats as a matter of course. It's a process much like that with turning around the image of pitbulls as mean and vicious. We have one veterinarian that we refer people to. He is very enlightened about the disease and the possibility that these cats will remain asymptomatic. He believes in life, even if it may be compromised in the future by disease or illness. He is pragmatic, thoughtful, and responsive to potential adopters of FeLV+ cats and kittens. You need to have someone like that create a flyer for you, or to be a reference.

In adopting out FeLV+ cats, we have had some success through the internet. We have traded FeLV+ cats to sanctuaries in exchange for healthy cats (10:1 ratio), we have fostered FeLV+ kittens into dog foster homes (no other cats) and some of them adopted them. We did the same sob stories we do for other compromised pets: flyers, radio PSAs, pets of the week. (See my prior posts.) But FeLV is the boogeyman of cat adoptions and the sad reality is that short of sanctuaries or a cure, FeLV+ cats will be the great challenge following saving healthy, treatable, and ferals.

Good luck.

What about when the local shelter won't work with rescues to place animals?

Question from Michelle:

I agree with you that adopting animals, especially the difficult to adopt, is a question of time and space. I have fostered dogs for as long as six months while waiting for that perfect match. I am constantly amazed at the wonderful people who open up their hearts and homes to so many of these dogs with "issues".

In our community, a coalition formed when several shelter employees were fired for fostering young kittens slated for euthanasia. The coalition has been working with our shelter and county government to increase adoptions and decrease euthanasias, but this is an uphill battle. The shelter clings to the belief that "you can't find homes for them all." I feel this is a defeatist attitude that propagates within their practices and translates to: "You can't find homes for them all, so why try."

The shelter regularly has empty runs, but still has a high euthanasia rate and lists many of its euthanasias as necessary because of "behavior." I am of the opinion that 99% of what it takes to save animals is the right attitude and vision and the remaining 1% is the actual effort it takes to accomplish that mission (well, maybe a bit more than 1%.) How do we help our shelter overcome the attitude barrier, which ultimately results in the deaths of these "special adoptables"?

Response from Nathan:

Work with them. Bring solutions to the table that will benefit them and the animals. Provide workable arrangements for rescue groups to be able to save animals that the shelter can't or won't save, and offer them incentives. One must first be polite. One must be thoughtful and rational. One must offer solutions. One must meet with them and ask them to partner with the rescue groups and see how they can work together in a spirit of mutual respect. One must set a timetable for negotiation and compromise.

But, if they refuse, one must fight for the animals. And, the best way to do that is by a public campaign. Take it to the people. Put out a position paper that describes what other communities are doing to save lives and compare it to the lack of progress in your own. Use the media. Show the kitten who died in the shelter when your rescue group was willing not only to foster the kitten, but also find him a home.

I remember reading about a shelter in Virginia where this exact scenario allegedly occurred. According to a newspaper account, five employees had requested that the shelter start a foster program to save young and sick animals, rather than immediately killing them. But the shelter's long-time executive director refused, saying she did not want a foster care program at the shelter. (Despite foster care being a cost-free way to save lives.) Tired of killing kittens and sick animals that could be saved, staff - in concert with caring volunteers - began taking them home and then returning them when they were old enough or healthy enough to be adopted. Unfortunately, their lifesaving efforts were discovered, and they were fired.

I have said before that I believe the no-kill movement is a story not only between the old guard and the new, but a battle between heroes and villains. In late 1993, when Richard Avanzino, then president of the San Francisco SPCA, began his public crusade to save 100% of healthy San Francisco homeless dogs and cats, most animal organizations actually came out in opposition. He finally persuaded the director of the city shelter to sign an agreement. But I don't believe he could have gotten the city shelter on board without a public campaign and threat of public initiative and a fight.

The mantra of folks in our movement is that we all have to get along, that our common enemy is the public (because they won't make lifetime commitments to their pets or spay/neuter), and that we can't fight a common enemy if we are fighting each other. That is a whole lot of B.S.

What matters is saving lives. If I lived in a community where the shelter director was killing animals who could be saved through foster care, the goal would be "regime change," to use the parlance of the day. Many of my colleagues do not agree. They talk about compromise and negotiation. They talk about how the poor animal control director has to do the dirty work, while the rescue groups get to parade their lifesaving and make all the money. More B.S.

I have heard rescue groups at conferences talk about negotiations with animal control lasting for six years. Six years of needless killing, six years of lack of progress, six years of furry bodies in dumpsters. Enough. Look at your calendar. The year is 2003. SPCAs and humane societies have been in this country since 1863. One hundred and fifty years of killing is enough. The word "adopt" is an acronym. It is A.D.O.P.T.--Animals Deserve Our Protection Today. TODAY! Right now. Not in six years.

It is time to insist and demand that shelters put in place the programs for saving lives: public access adoption hours, low-cost spay/neuter, a feral cat assistance program, a foster care program, medical care for sick/injured homeless animals.

Without these, the animals will continue to die. Any director who refuses to implement these is engaging in conduct that is intolerable, inexcusable, outrageous and pernicious. They are killing animals who don't need to be, and

shouldn't be, killed.

Take heart that cities as diverse as San Francisco, Atlanta and New York City have forced recalcitrant shelters to either get on board with lifesaving, or move out of the way. It may take time, it may take energy, but when the animals start living instead of dying, the results will be well worth it.

How do you explain an animal's special need to a potential adopter?

Question from Debra:

When you have an animal that is more difficult to market, like a blind or deaf animal, how do you explain the "issue" to interested customers? We sometimes hear staff mentioning the problem first and it often turns people off. How can you be honest with people and where do you draw the line? Do you mention a "problem" on the cage card, or wait until someone asks? How much detail do you give? Also, sometimes during a surrender, the previous owner will mention things like "chews everything," etc. Sometimes we see this and sometimes we don't. Where do you draw the line on being honest with people but at the same time giving the animal a fair chance at being adopted.

Response from Nathan:

on't hide it. It's a plus. It is easier to adopt out a big black dog who is blind, than a big black dog who is, well, like 10 other big black dogs in your shelter. If he chews, he chews. As you tell the community about your successes, they will begin to believe in your lifesaving ethic and want to help. Nothing is more rewarding than the family with kids in tow walking past all the cute little kittens and falling in love with a 10-year old tom cat with chewed up ears and big jowls.

Stop the "Sweet and affectionate dogs and cats seek loving homes" repertoire and start talking about the dogs and cats who don't fit this description. Except for aggression in dogs, families will adopt out every dog with wacky problems and unusual ailments. Some will have a longer average length of stay. But you don't want to hide problems that may lead to having the pet returned. That takes you away from your goal, not closer to it.

Incidentally, be wary, as some people aren't forthright about why they are surrendering animals. There is lots of guilt involved, so take everything with a grain of salt and do an independent assessment. Don't hide what you know to be true. If a dog comes in who chews on anything and everything, we immediately go to work on the issue--foster care, training, desensitization, whatever. If we believe it is a problem that is going to cause the dog to stay here longer than usual, we exploit his time with us to rid him of the problem, and ask the adoptive family to continue the regimen at home. But what you will generally find is that "impediments" can be a plus if you market them correctly in ways that I have mentioned before. And if you are aggressive in your adoption efforts for the kittens and puppies and others who don't have impediments, you'll be able to afford some dogs staying longer than usual--especially if you rely on foster parents.

For example, we rescued 30 cats from a residence, of which five were blind. We put them in foster care and then put one of them in our local newspaper's Pet of the Week column. There was a picture of "Justine", one of the cats, and a blurb that read: "What does it mean to be loveable? What makes us worthy of compassion? These are the questions I ponder as I wait for someone to find me loveable. So far, no one has answered those questions for me. I am not looking for philosophy. I am looking for something real and tangible. For me, that truth is a loving home. I am blind. I also had to have one eye removed. My last home didn't take care of me and I lost my sight. But I am very loveable and every bit as worthy of compassion as the hundreds of little kittens who get adopted in a day, while I sit and wait... and wait... and wait."

Over 20 people called or came to the shelter the afternoon that feature appeared. All five found homes.

People want to save lives. They want to feel like they did something of value in their own lives. Your shelter has plenty of opportunities to help them do that.

Comment from Michelle:

Amen! Once we started telling potential adopters all the quirks of our animals, the better homes we found. When a dog has separation anxiety so bad he will break through a plate glass window to get back to the shelter, they need to know that in order to save everyone involved a tremendous amount of heartache and stress. The truth is nothing to be ashamed of! And, it helps find just the right home and just the right committed owners.

Comment from Jude:

I am very happy to see this topic of "difficult to place" pets. I worked for a no-kill facility. We found a home for BayBay...a small, wheat-colored dog who viciously growled at anyone who came near her. She was kept in a cage in the van, not out with the adoption dogs. On New years Day, a couple came up (no children) and said they

wanted to do something important for animals by asking for the most unadoptable dog. After we let them spend almost six hours with BayBay, gave them tons of instructions, and checked their background, BayBay successfully found a home.

We have found homes for dogs with Parvo [with our meds], and other maladies. If you can house a pet long enough, the right home will come along.

Adopting out pairs of animals

Question from Cassandra:

How do we adopt out pairs? We have Siberian Husky sisters, 6 years old, never been separated, and we have Akita/Shepherd sisters, 7 years old, never been separated. How can we find people willing to take on 2 large breed dogs with many behavior problems?

Response from Nathan:

I once went to a conference where someone gave tips on adopting out bonded pairs. He said give them names like "Peanut Butter & Jelly", "Bonnie & Clyde", that type of thing. His experience was that you would increase your adoptions by 10% because it will be difficult for someone to adopt "Peanut Butter" but not "Jelly," so it was more likely that they would adopt both. I tried that, and it didn't work all that well. I would, nonetheless, encourage people to give it a shot. I am extremely impatient and want more immediate results, so the fact may be I didn't give it enough time to get a statistically significant evaluation. Try it.

Having said that, what I found ended up happening is that Peanut Butter & Jelly would sit at the shelter longer than other animals because the vast majority of potential adopters did not want to break up the pair but they didn't want two animals, just one. And then, after a while, someone would come along and adopt out Peanut Butter and leave Jelly. But then Jelly would get adopted very quickly. So, in my experience, trying to adopt out pairs increases their length of stay. If you can afford that luxury, that's great. Most shelters can't. My strongest advice is not to put up any needless barriers to adoption. We want quality homes and we want what is best for the animal, but we want a home. We also tried doing two pets for the price of one specials. Our experience was largely the same.

One day we rescued two dogs, one of which had fallen into a ravine and broke her leg pretty badly. The other dog (her brother, we suspected), sat at the top of the ravine barking for two days. He alerted neighbors, and when they came, he jumped into the ravine and laid on top of his sister. At the shelter, he whined and cried when we separated the two and calmed down when we put them together.

In the end, we couldn't save the sister's leg and so when she went to the vet for her amputation, the veterinarian doing the surgery fell in love with her and wanted to adopt her--but not the brother. Should I have turned away a great home and insisted they had to go together? Everyone on my staff, including the volunteers, thought so. But I couldn't do that. Why should I stop this dog from getting a great home, with the veterinarian who did the surgery and knew what it would take to care for her for the rest of her life? It would have been nice to have a Cinderella ending to the story where the pair went home together forevermore. They both found loving homes (he within two days of her adoption), but not together. That is what I am here to do--find good homes and I am not going to turn away those because Walt Disney would have found them a home together in one of his movies.

My advice? Unless there is some basis to believe (not knowing what the behavior problems are) that breaking them up will cause one or both of them to landslide in behavior (which I believe would seldom be the case), break up the pair. Do it as a matter of policy. Two sisters come in, put them in separate runs. They'll get adopted quicker.

If you can't do that, you have to accept the fact that most of your adopters are adopting out one pet and thus, your length of stay will increase. Try doing things like two for one, change the names to a pair name, and offer other incentives to cut down costs (free food for 6 months), that sort of thing. You may need to be more patient than I am.

Comment from Celeste:

I, too, have found that required pairs leads to longer stays, for the reasons Nathan states.

I have found the narrow window. It can be effective for infant kittens and, to a lesser degree, puppies.

For a time, I worked with a no-kill that was pair-happy. If any two animals showed any affection for each other at all, they HAD to be adopted together - even if they later showed equal affection for other housemates, or sometimes fought, or had other problems with their "buddy." Before leaving the organization, I joked to my sympathetic friend that it was the same as if we had to marry the very first person we kissed! Just 'cause we exchanged a few cuddles didn't mean we were a lifelong match.

Another dynamic I've found with pairing animals (especially with one shy/one outgoing), is that the shy one will stay in that role until separated from the attention hog. It's as if as long as they can get attention 'the easy way'--with their friend, once all the people go home at night--they won't bother learning about how to interact with humans.

They end up holding each other back for months or years from adoption (because nobody wants one pet who's social, and one they can barely touch). Invariably, when the cocky one gets adopted (always the first to go), then the back-of-the-cage sulker has a chance to shine. Or maybe it's just that they get lonely enough to seek out new venues for love.

What to do when animals have been in the shelter for a long time

Question from a member:

Our local humane society recently became "no-kill". The problem is that our animals remain at the shelter until they are adopted, which could be anywhere from a week to years! One of our dogs has been at the shelter for almost two years. She is dog aggressive and cat aggressive; she digs; she's hyper; she pulls on the leash. And everyday, she is passed by. How do we get her adopted? Or, if she is "un-adoptable," how to I convince my manager to euthanize, when her view of "no-kill" is that we don't kill any healthy animals?

Response from Nathan:

I posted my thought on adopting out dogs with aggression and won't reiterate that here. I am not an advocate for killing animals and will leave that to the conscience of your community.

Hyper and pulling on a leash, however, is not a big barrier. And digging is normal dog behavior (she just needs to learn WHERE to dig, instead of NOT to dig). But the bottom line is that this dog is untrained and not getting enough socialization or training IN THE SHELTER. Since she has been around a while, the shelter needs to invest in doing both. You can get rid of leash pulling right away with a gentle leader or Sporn harness, available at most pet supply stores, and by giving all dog-walking volunteers a protocol to follow to reiterate what is expected of the dog.

Hyperactivity means a dog with a lot of energy and so the best policy is to exhaust the hell out of the dog. We like to give the dogs at least one really long walk (30-45 minutes) by a volunteer, and then throw in off-leash play in the fenced yard and some dog-dog play too. That way, adopters are seeing dogs who aren't jumping up, barking loudly or pulling on their leash. In fact, their tongues are hanging out and they are tired. They show better.

Use her time in the shelter to train and socialize the poor dog. The longer you have a dog, the more trained she should be becoming. If that is not the case, the shelter is failing this dog. Now, the reality is, very long shelter stays increases barrier type aggressions and the dog-dog, dog-cat aggression will only get worse. When that starts to happen, my recommendation is that you give the dog a break from the shelter and put her into a foster home. You can adopt her out of the foster home by posting her pix and bio on the website with a direct link to the foster parent's e-mail, as well as in your newsletter; through e-mail and pets of the week; or, you can have the foster parent bring the dog in during busy days like Saturdays for showing and then take her home at night or the rest of the week.

Does your shelter offer any type of incentives for harder to place dogs? Does your shelter use dog fanciers or other people to help train the dogs? The answer should always be YES.

Pitbull article Nathan wrote to his local paper

For those of you who are interested:

The following is an article that appeared in our local newspaper following an attack by two pitbulls that I mentioned in yesterday's post on turning around the image of pitbulls. You are free to plagiarize at will. You are free to copy it and submit it to your own newspaper under your own byline. You are free to tell people you wrote it. I don't care. We need to get positive news out there because these are the things which will help turn around the image of pitbulls.

Recent events once again put pitbulls in the hot seat. Highly publicized attacks in ours, as well as communities nationwide give people added pause about the increasingly bad reputation of the dreaded American pitbull terrier. In many animal shelters across the country, any "pitbull" who comes through the front door goes out the back door--in a body bag. But is such a reputation deserved? And are policies requiring their death fair?

Pitbulls have a reputation as a mean, vicious breed of dog. But there's another side of the story. And it all starts with Stubby, the most decorated war dog in U.S. history. Stubby's military valor led to the creation of the Military K-9 Corps. A pitbull, he earned several medals and rose to the rank of sergeant for his bravery and service in World War I. He returned home to a hero's welcome and a visit to the White House.

Raised as loving, family pets, pitbulls like Stubby were commonplace; unreasonable fears of vicious attacks were virtually unheard of. In fact, at the time, the pitbull terrier was perhaps the most popular dog in America.

Not to be outdone, other pitbulls have established their own place in history. Alaska's first hearing dog - dogs who act as the "ears" for the deaf, similar to seeing eye dogs for the blind - was a pitbull named RCA. In fact, Helen Keller's lifelong companion was her pitbull terrier.

During the early 1990s, a pitbull named Weela saved 30 people, 29 dogs, 13 horses and a cat during a flood in Southern California and went on to become the Ken-L-Ration 1993 dog of the year.

Today, pitbulls are even narcotics officers. Perhaps the most famous of these is Popsicle, who was found in the freezer during a drug raid. Rescued by an officer, Popsicle joined the police academy and graduated as a K-9 drug-sniffing dog. His many drug busts put him in the pages of People Magazine.

And who can forget Petey, the loveable pal of the Little Rascals, one of the most famous canine actors of our time? It may surprise some to learn that Petey himself was a classic American pitbull terrier.

Imagine if any of these dogs, or the thousands of friendly ones whose only claim is that they were part of someone's family but got lost, were unfortunate enough to find themselves at an animal shelter with an anti-pitbull policy. He or she would be killed, purely based on their breed.

Pitbulls aren't naturally bad. But some pitbull owners are. They are the ones who train dogs to be mean and vicious. They're the ones who allow dogs to be ripped to shreds in training bouts and dog fights. And they're the ones who need to be punished.

While it may be true that dogs of any breed can be bred and raised in ways that make them dangerous, it is true that these dogs appear to be at particularly high risk of falling into the wrong hands. But the answer is not to ban pitbulls. Dog fighters and abusers would just move on to another breed, like German shepherds, rottweilers or Dobermans.

The answer is to pursue, prosecute and punish dog fighters to the full extent of the law. To set an example that will deter others. Then pitbulls, like other dogs, can go back to doing what they do best: chasing balls, fetching sticks- and playing in the park with our own little rascals.

Eliminating the old school thought and ushering in no more homeless pets

Question from a member:

You stated "Any (shelter) director who refuses to implement these (changes) is engaging in conduct that is intolerable, inexcusable, outrageous and pernicious" in reference to programs that would stop the needless killing of animals. My local shelter employs such a director - one who is resistant to offers of help and will not allow volunteers or rescues to be utilized to their full potential in fear that they will speak out about shelter operations and conditions. Former employees and volunteers have gone to the media. The state has investigated the shelter and documented neglect and financial mismanagement. Yet, nothing has been done and it is business as usual: animals continue to languish and die. What can be done?

Response from Nathan:

It cannot be business as usual, because you have received media attention and documentation of neglect. If you are waiting for someone to take the next step, walk into the bathroom and take a good long look in the mirror. That person is you. Don't wait until someone else steps up to the plate.

The first thing you want to do is keep the issue in the public eye, by issuing a periodic report card for the media. If there is documentation, break it up into areas of neglect and mismanagement. Say, every two or three months, put out an interim report: has anything changed in those key areas? How many animals have died since then? Include in the report recommendations by the state (or your own) of changes that should be implemented. Send a copy to the director. Then in your "report card," list how many of the recommendations in the state report or your report have been implemented. Give them grades.

These reports should come from an organization. It doesn't have to be a 501(c)(3), but put together a group. Elect officers, meet regularly, give yourselves a name, use letterhead stationary, and keep the issue before the public.

Once you issue your report, send it to the media, to the chamber of commerce, to the city council, to the shelter director, to the governor, to your local and state representatives, to county judges, to the district attorney, to local big wigs. No silly cc:d unprofessional lists of one hundred people, just a nice clean copy to all the players in your community.

You then want to approach your city council or the Board of Directors and provide them with the roadmap. Two or three pages (not a 100 page novel), of initial steps to get the shelter on track with lifesaving, proposing measurable cost-effective changes that the shelter can do. Foster care is a low- to no-cost way of saving lives. It doesn't cost the shelter anything (foster parents pay for food and litter) while expanding the lifesaving capacity. It costs \$100 to kill an animal and dispose of the carcass. If you adopt the animal instead, you get an adoption fee, a spay/neuter fee, and a happy customer whom you can solicit for membership six months later. It is cost-effective to save lives. Killing animals is a waste of money. If rescue groups are willing to take animals, that is a way of shifting the cost of care from the taxpayers to private individuals. Play up the economic aspects of this "public-private partnership".

Ask for a public hearing. If they won't grant you one, you have the privilege of the floor to speak about any issue to your city council or county board for three minutes. Be polite, be firm, and do NOT exceed the time limit. Present them with the document. Alert the media ahead of time with a professional looking press release. Shelters rely on good public image, and keeping the issue hot in the media continues the pressure to change.

If you have an Animal Welfare Commission in your community that is appointed by the Board of Supervisors, you will want to ask them to hold hearings. You can also ask that the city council appoint a committee to review the state's findings and propose changes and a timetable. You can approach the District Attorney and ask for a grand jury investigation.

At all times, the report and your conduct must be thoughtful, objective, and rational. Coats and ties, business suits, are mandatory for public meetings. You are professionals. I don't mean to patronize anyone, but too often I have seen an important message get lost because the messenger is unprofessional. When I was working in Washington, D.C. for an animal advocacy group of attorneys, a town in Maryland proposed banning animal testing within their community. The National Institutes of Health sent representatives to meet with council members urging them to reject the proposal. They arrived in suits and ties, with reports and recommendations. The "spokesperson" for the animal protection folks showed up with a T-shirt that said, "Vivisectors are scum" and had a picture of some researcher looking like a mad scientist with an animal, a hatchet, and blood. What a betrayal to the animals. There is absolutely no excuse for failing to show up in a coat and tie or business suit, of being professional, of arguing your case passionately but professionally. All it does is harm your credibility and results in your dismissal as a "radical".

Secondly, you can also write and propose legislation, particularly if there is some type of initiative process where you live. In San Francisco, the SPCA under Richard Avanzino forced a recalcitrant city shelter to partner with them in saving lives by threatening a public initiative. They even wrote the legislation, called it the Adoption Act, and got the support of the San Francisco Chronicle. The proposed legislation actually would have made it illegal for the city pound to kill an animal that an SPCA or other humane organization was willing to save. Because the city shelter did not want a public fight it could not win (what would it argue? We want to continue to kill these animals?), it caved in. The Adoption Act became the Adoption Pact, and a voluntary agreement was put into place.

That Pact - the 1998 Animal Shelter Law, which makes it illegal for any shelter in California to kill an animal if a 501(c)(3) animal protection group is willing to accept that animal into their own adoption program - became the basis of California law. Think about that for a minute. It is ILLEGAL in California for a shelter to kill an animal if a rescue group is willing to place the animal. Use it to model your own proposed legislation.

Now, keep in mind that legislation isn't the cure all. It must be implemented effectively if it is to have real hope of change. Many rescue groups are not utilizing the law effectively and many shelters are blatantly violating it. The fight continues after the legislation is passed, but all it takes to bind the hand of shelters that won't partner to save lives is someone to force the issue.

Once again, it may take some time. But the tide is on your side. No-kill is inevitable. The dinosaurs will get swept aside -- some later than others. But there is no turning back. The Rubicon has been crossed. Remember the wise words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "We are marching no longer by ones and twos but in legions of thousands, convinced now it cannot be denied by any human force."

The animals need you. The animals are depending on you. Do NOT let them down. Take up the banner and fight.

Comment from Michelle:

We are also trying to eliminate the old school thought in my community. Our website (www.caparlington.org) reports on what we have done; feel free to use any documents there as templates.

We are currently updating our position paper, which we use to educate people in our community about who we are and to help gather supporters. We made a special effort to make sure this document contained only facts and the changes our coalition would like to see in our community--not criticisms of the shelter.

We presented one document to our county's governing board outlining the programs we wanted which were free and would not cost the county a dime (in some cases, could actually save taxpayers money). They listened to this.

One piece of advice I would offer is to save and record everything. We published a 150+ page report that included information about the shelter from almost a year's worth of meetings with them, including: feedback from the shelter's volunteers and members of the public calling for improvements at the shelter; newspaper articles; research about programs we asked for (foster care, off-site adoptions, etc.) which had been successfully implemented in neighboring communities and across the nation. We put all this in one document and gave it to our county government. We kept the entire report "above the belt" (i.e., we let the facts state our case and not the opinions). The county came back to us and asked for five additional copies of the report. Now it's a government document that any member of the public can see.

I hope some or all of this information can be used in your community or will offer some helpful ideas.

Saving money and saving lives

Question from a member:

You mentioned that one of the ways you saved money was by cutting some ineffective programs and concentrating your efforts on saving the animals coming through the door. We are a municipal shelter with a union that is overseen by commissioners. We cannot just cut programs. The commissioners love the feel-good public image of humane education and the pet therapy visits our staff does.

Do you have any suggestions for a municipal shelter that ends up euthanizing animals with treatable conditions (such as heartworm or URI) because we don't have the space to isolate and hold them - or the money to treat them? We handle approximately 20,000 animals a year.

Response from Nathan:

Foster care is a low- to no-cost way of saving lives. Most URIs can resolve without antibiotics (which are cheap anyway), simply by sending the animals into foster care. And because foster parents pay for litter and food, it doesn't cost you anything. At the same time, you dramatically increase your capacity for saving lives. If you are taking in 20,000 animals per year, you live in a community with a nice-sized population. Use the public. I keep hearing that shelters don't have space. We don't have space at the shelter to treat sick or injured dogs. But we have foster homes. With 20,000 animals coming in, you should be sending at least a couple thousand into foster homes annually. At least. So, there is some space. A lot of space. On the Best Friends website, there is a document called "Building a No-kill Community". If every aspect of those programs were implemented, your death rate would plummet. Most of those programs are cost-effective. Waiting for the money to come before you start lifesaving is putting the cart before the horse.

The San Francisco SPCA under Avanzino was near bankruptcy when he started to turn things around by lifesaving, telling the community about it, asking for their help, and then using that support for further lifesaving.

I keep hearing "our director won't do this", or "this person won't do that". As if someone asked, an answer was given, and we can all go home now. Where would we be today if we accepted the answer that there are too many animals, not enough homes, and that the best we could ever hope to do is give them a so-called humane death? We'd still be butchering 80% of shelter animals.

The late Roger Caras, who headed the ASPCA, once said that the notion of creating successful programs to save the lives at risk -- which no-kill represents - was so impossible that it was "not worthy of a passing daydream." If anyone out there believes that, you are in the wrong line of work. No-kill is a movement of visionaries and others willing to put action into their words and deeds. No-kill is about results. No-kill doesn't ask the question "Can we save them?" No-kill fights for the animals.

Have you tried starting a "Friends of the Animal Shelter", as a 501(c)(3) which can fundraise and then use the money for antibiotics for URI or Robitussin for kennel cough? What about giving out vouchers for spay/neuter? Have you worked with rescue groups, breed fanciers, feral cat caretakers and others to partner with the shelter to save the lives at risk?

Has anyone presented the commissioners with a cost analysis of killing vs. saving? Of putting money into one program vs. another? Has anyone offered to make pet therapy and humane ed volunteer-run programs so you can

cut the staff positions and save money for other lifesaving programs? Has anyone offered to make those programs fee-for-service so you can zero out the line item and use the money elsewhere? Keep at it.

The world isn't that static. Commissioners come and go. Commissioners vote and then vote the reverse. Commissioners can be persuaded. Your job is to create the roadmap and then pursue strategies to get them implemented, piecemeal if need be.

Using liability and unions as a way to not work with rescues

Question from a member:

I work with a rescue group and we try to work with our local animal control to take treatable animals or harder to place animals so they can concentrate on healthy animals ready to be adopted. The director of animal control won't allow any fosters or volunteers in because of "liability issues" and "union issues". This makes it very difficult to work with them and get any animals out. Do you have any ideas for how to approach them on this?

Response from Nathan:

Another example of a heart that feels one way, while the mouth says another. This isn't about liability and it isn't about unions. It is about control and lack of accountability to the animals. The animals are dying. And shrouding the issue in these smokescreens is unacceptable.

I have tried to lay out my advice for this in answering at least three prior posts and won't repeat it all here:

1. Negotiate for change.
2. Always be polite and professional.
3. Set a timetable.

If that fails, you need to fight for the animals (again, see prior posts). I hope that advice is helpful to you. You have two things going for you: 1) the public will support you; and 2) the media will pick the story up. Use that to your advantage.

A couple of quick notes about unions and liability issues.

One, unions often come into a shelter for legitimate reasons (workers aren't treated fairly, etc.), but once those are addressed, unions may need to continue justifying their existence (like any bureaucracy). Unfortunately, they can end up stifling innovation and change. If you can get the union on your side (you are, after all, proposing to reduce their worker's workloads), great, but it can be a double-edged sword.

Approach the union representative directly. I would be surprised if the union would oppose taking animals out to foster and save since this does not impact their work of cleaning cages, adoption counseling, etc. But be careful.

The issue of liability is an easier one. The San Francisco SPCA under Avanzino fostered a good 800-1200 animals per year for 20 years. No lawsuits. We foster over 800 per year. No lawsuits. But for the faint at heart or risk averse, you can propose to start out with easy animals after screening for temperament and disease. In addition, on the Best Friends website, we put together a foster care handbook which addresses how to reduce and eliminate liability for foster care. These include hold harmless clauses, training, liability insurance - that sort of stuff. Make those part of the proposed program.

If she/he still won't budge, once again, you can start a public campaign that he/she is out of touch with what the rest of the nation is doing and is causing animals to needlessly die in your community. How can he/she defend that?

I'm an individual who took on a difficult foster dog and am drained

Question from Marie:

I have had a foster dog for two months now that I was not supposed to get. I cannot find ANYONE willing to help me with her. I have tried everyone from rescue lists, veterinarians, shelters, and humane societies. I arranged a rescue back in June for 14 dogs and 7 cats. All went to foster homes, rescues and no-kill shelters. I arranged the rescue because I personally could not take in any more animals due to time restrictions. The next day one of the dogs that was placed in foster was dropped back off at my house at 10:00pm and has been with me ever since. I do not have much experience with difficult dogs. I work sometimes 12 hours a day with my husband because we own a company.

My energy is just being drained from trying to take care of her, my two other dogs, our rescued turtle, and hermit crabs, on top of keeping our house and company together. She has been severely abused and is very scared of everything. I don't know what to do. At this point, it is keep her or she will be put down. No one wants her. If you have ANY advice, I would appreciate it. She is 5-6 years old, a golden/shepherd mix, and weighs 60 pounds. She had tapeworms, heartworms, fleas, and ticks when we got her. She tries to run whenever you go near her. Please help. I'm desperate.

Response from Nathan:

I have tried to give as much advice as I could in terms of presenting and placing dogs. I listed the steps I thought were effective: from accepting responsibility to presentation to promotion. They are all there in the posts. The steps work. Go through them. You will find the dog a home. It may take time, but it will happen.

I am sorry you live in a community where the shelter isn't proactive in saving lives. That a private person would have to do all this because the shelter isn't working hard enough shows why we need No Kill solutions sooner rather than later. You are to be commended for trying to help these animals.

But truth is truth. You have accepted this dog into your protective embrace and you cannot in good conscience abandon that, so the responsibility is yours. Never, never, never, never accept the responsibility for an animal unless you are going to do what is necessary to save him.

That is what most so-called "open" shelters do. To rescue an animal only to kill an animal is not much of a rescue. Don't do it. You need to draw a line when you are at the end of your rope. But this isn't the end, because the dog is in your home. So do what you need to and must do to save him.

This dog needs professional help in terms of behavior modification. If you live in a community near a veterinary college, you should call the veterinary behaviorist. Be wary of "kill the dog" solutions, as the veterinary profession may be more conservative than No Kill demands. Find dog fanciers or trainers in your community. But do NOT ask them to take responsibility for this dog. That is YOURS. Ask them if they would be willing to help you train the dog or work with the dog or assess the dog and give you a protocol.

He may be with you for a while, so give him another dog while you are gone that he can bond with - other dogs train better than any person can. At the same time you work with the dog, keep sending out e-mails, pictures, updates, flyers, that sort of thing. Follow the steps.

Keep in mind that if the fear results in aggression, you may have to consider that the dog is not adoptable. The only behavior I find intolerable in terms of adoption is viciousness. If there is aggression and the prognosis for recovery is poor, have a heart-to-heart with your conscience.

But otherwise, don't give up on this dog. It may take time. But if you hold on and save this dog, you will have demonstrated your character. And that is something few people in this world seem to have.

Avoiding the disgruntled employee label when you point out problems in the shelter

Question from a member:

I was a volunteer at a shelter and also a management employee until I resigned due to deplorable management.

I put in writing to the director my recommendations about situations in the shelter that harmed animals that were never addressed and about employees who were at fault. Yet those who questioned shelter practices have been forced out and those who contribute to the demise of some very adoptable animals remain and have even been promoted. The director even had the gall to say that my information could harm the organization, when all of the management practices she allowed did so much harm.

I have been asked not to return as a volunteer. I know that there are a zillion other groups that I could assist in my area, but I feel that it is my duty to those that have been forced out to help. What recommendations would you have for a former employee in such a situation?

Response from Nathan:

Your situation is very common. Since you were at the shelter, you were witness firsthand to ways that the shelter is failing the animals in its care. One thing I keep seeing over and over in this forum is the same question being asked in different ways. The issue is no different than those of others who have problems and need to pursue a public campaign for change. Don't get sidetracked by small distinctions. That the factual scenario is not identical to others does not change the analysis, or the recommendation. You will be labeled a disgruntled employee. There is

no way around that. But if you document everything in writing, if your letters are polite and your recommendations based on good comparisons with other communities, when you do show up to the city council meeting, it will be hard to believe. In fact, I would steal their thunder by owning up to it in the first place. "It would be too easy to dismiss these concerns by saying I am a disgruntled employee..." Also, you can turn it around by saying that, by the same token, management's position is too biased because they have their own reputation and jobs to protect. Both of these reasons make an excellent case for an independent assessment by a disinterested outside party. Otherwise, I would follow the same recommendations I made in an earlier post for a public campaign.

Putting labels on dogs--"Bad with kids", "Adult home only"

Question from Linda:

I volunteer at a shelter that has recently started to try to implement a policy such as the one in Tompkins County. There is much disagreement about what that means. One statement recently made to me was, "In Tompkins County, they say a dog is unadoptable if it can't be placed with kids. If we want to follow their plan, we should do that too. We wouldn't have a problem getting all adoptables adopted if we did that." Then I read that Tompkins County adopts out 92% of all animals (93% of dogs) who come in. The two bits of information don't make sense to me. In our shelter, I am sure that 93% of dogs do not pass the temperament test (these are never put up for adoption). Of those who do pass, many are marked as "adult home only" or "no small children."

Many weeks when I am there, a good 50% of the dogs are marked "no small children." Sometimes this means they jump up on people. Sometimes I hear statements such as "because of the breed." The temperament test actually was okay. I think the practice has changed recently, but just a few months ago, all spaniel mixes were marked as "no children," because "cockers are snippy with kids." What is your definition of a dog that is okay with kids? If mixes or somewhat dominant dogs who jump up are not adoptable to families with children and we put down all that are not adoptable to families with children - we would empty our kennels quickly!

Response from Nathan:

When I was at the San Francisco SPCA and we were saving all healthy animals and most treatable ones, the rumor was we were killing them in the middle of the night. North Shore Animal League, the largest no-kill shelter in the country, was adopting out 18-20,000 animals per year and the rumor was they were selling them for research. Success breeds resentment, and resentment breeds innuendo and rumor. If one community or shelter is doing a great job, another who isn't is going to downplay that community's success to justify the killing. Short answer: don't believe all the rumors you hear about successful communities.

This SPCA does not adopt out aggressive dogs. In order to determine a dog's aggressiveness, not only does an employee trained in evaluating aggressiveness do a temperament test, but, if the dog fails, we also bring in a veterinarian specializing in behavior medicine to do an independent assessment. If a dog is vicious to kids, that dog is not going to be adopted out in this community. We don't stigmatize breeds by saying cocker spaniels are not good with kids, or pit bulls are not good with kids, or any of that. We look for aggression. That's it.

Having said that, we saved 93% of all dogs last year. Of the 65 dogs who were killed, 50 were killed for aggression, and the other 15 for illness or injury with a poor prognosis for recovery. We are very fair with the dogs.

Too many animals have been needlessly killed by shelters across the country. At the same time, many shelters turn away adopters, many of whom would provide an excellent home, but for some bit of dogma that has no basis in reality. Since most communities are still killing healthy dogs and cats and those with treatable conditions, we need to ensure that our adoption standards make sense. That doesn't mean you "lower" your adoption standards. It means your standards should be thoughtful. If the dog passes his or her temperament evaluation, I don't see why a shelter needs to put an unnecessary barrier to adoption like "adult home only". Most shelter dogs jump. To limit that dog to a home without kids is limiting good, loving homes that might make a commitment to that dog - and a commitment to train that dog.