No Kill Advocacy Center

Ten Steps to Adopting Your Way Out of Killing

You can't adopt your way out of killing. It is one of the most enduring dogmas in the animal shelter field. But it could not be more wrong. You actually *can* adopt your way out of killing. The data proves it. Experience proves it. And that is good news for animals and animal lovers.

The Data

Roughly 8 million animals enter shelters every year. Can we find homes for that many shelter animals? The good news is that we don't have to. Some animals need adoption, but others do not. Some animals, like unsocialized cats, need neuter and release. Others will be reclaimed by their families. Some animals will go to rescue groups. Others are irremediably suffering or hopelessly ill. And many more can be kept out of the shelter through a comprehensive pet retention effort. While about four million dogs and cats will be killed in pounds and shelters this year, roughly three million will be killed *for lack of a new home*. Can we find homes for those animals? Yes we can.

Using the most successful adoption communities as a benchmark and adjusting for population, U.S. shelters combined should be adopting almost nine million animals a year. That is almost three times the number being killed for lack of a home. In fact, it is more than *total impounds*, and of those, almost half do not need a new home. But the news gets even better. There are almost two times that many potential adopters each year.

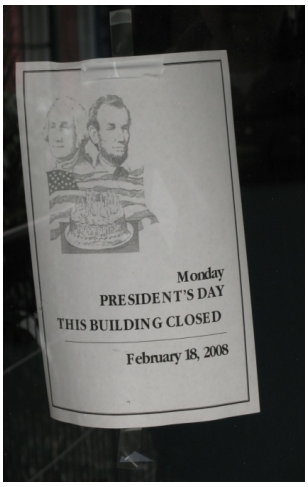
There are over 23 million people who are going to get an animal next year. Some are already committed to adopting from a shelter. Some are already committed to getting one from a breeder or other commercial source. But 17 million have not decided where that animal will come from and research shows they can be influenced to adopt from a shelter. That's 17 million people vying for roughly 3 million animals. So even if 80% of those people got their animal from somewhere other than a shelter, we could still zero out the killing. And many communities are proving it.

The Experience

There are communities with extremely high per capita intake rates who have done it. There are now No Kill communities across the U.S. and abroad: in New York and in California, in Colorado and Virginia, in Utah, Indiana, Kansas, and Kentucky, in Nevada, and across the globe. Washoe County, Nevada, for example, has been very hard hit by the economic downturn. Loss of jobs and loss of homes are at all-time highs. In fact, the state of Nevada has the highest unemployment rate in the nation. As a result, the two major shelters (Washoe County Regional Animal Services and the Nevada Humane Society) together take in four times the per capita rate of Los Angeles, five times the rate of San Francisco, seven times the rate of New York City, and over two times the national average. If there was ever a community which could not adopt its way out of killing, it is Washoe County. But they are doing just that.

And it didn't take them five years to do it. All these communities did it virtually overnight, *by adopting their way out of killing*. Of course, that doesn't mean that the other programs and services of the No Kill Equation aren't crucial. They are. Some, like foster care, keep animals alive long enough to be adopted because, quite simply, some animals are not ready for adoption when they first arrive at the shelter. But, in the end, all these animals found loving homes.

The Excuses



High-kill, low-adoption shelters like to peddle the fiction that increasing the *quantity* of adoptions results in the lowering of the *quality* of adoptions. They do this to deflect criticism by painting the alternative as darker. But increasing adoptions means public access adoption hours when working people and families with children (two important adopter demographics) can visit the shelter. It means greater visibility in the community, working with rescue groups, competing with pet stores and puppy mills, marketing, offsite adoptions, special events, adoption incentives, foster care, alternative placements, a fun and friendly shelter environment, setting and meeting goals, and a good public image. It has nothing to do with reducing quality.

Some shelters, for example, are open for adoption Monday through Friday, 9 am to 5 pm, when many people cannot visit the shelter. To adopt more, shelters need to be open when the kids are home, families are together, and working people can get to the shelter. That doesn't always have to

mean *more* hours, just *different* ones. Moreover, holidays are when families and working people can come to the shelter and when promotions and media outreach can have great impact. When shelters are closed on holidays, they are still staffed, they still take in stray animals, and they are still required to care, feed, and medicate animals. Days closed are just days of lost adoptions. Last year, an animal control shelter in Indiana stayed open for the first time on the 4th of July and did a big promotion, finding homes for 153 animals in a single day—animals who would have been killed in years past. It was, and remains, the single best adoption day for any shelter in Indiana ever. So how does a shelter adopt its way out of killing? There are ten steps to success.

The Steps to Success

1. Get the Right People on Board

People are the heart and soul of any organization, so staff members who are committed to the organization's mission and goals, share lifesaving values, and have a strong work ethic are crucial. Just because someone works at a shelter, humane society, or SPCA does not mean they care about animals and it does not mean they will leave no stone unturned to save a life. For many staff members, working at a shelter is a *job*, not a *mission*. And given the built in excuse of pet overpopulation and public irresponsibility, they've never been held accountable to their performance or results. Consequently, there is an epidemic of uncaring and underperformance in our nation's pounds and shelters.

To save lives, a shelter must be staffed by people who not only like animals, but like other people as well. That may mean termination of employment for some. Admittedly, this is no fun for anyone involved, but it may prove a necessary step to move forward effectively in many communities. It is always better to fire a bad staff member than kill a good animal. On the plus side, it means the shelter gets to reward the hard workers. It means new people with a passion for saving lives get hired. It means the job just got a whole lot easier because when a shelter has the right people on the team with a good attitude and a strong worth ethic, a lot of things fall into place right away.

Tompkins County, New York had 50% turnover in the first six months of its No Kill initiative. The result: a 93% save rate (75% decline in killing). In Reno, only three of the original pre-No Kill 60 staff members remain. The result? A 91% communitywide save rate. Two communities in Delaware saw a 70% decline in killing following an 80% turnover in staff at the shelter. In fact, we are not aware of any shelter/pound going from a culture of killing to a culture of lifesaving without turnover in management and staff.

The more caring shelter staff are; the more educated they are; the more patient they are; the more helpful they are; the more creative they are; the more people will see the shelter as a resource—a resource to find lost pets, a resource to solve problems, a place to donate to, and more importantly, a place to adopt out animals.

2. Keep Them Out of the Shelter

The job is easier if there are less animals coming in, especially animals with "behavior" issues and other impediments to immediate adoption. It is also easier if recently adopted animals are checked up on to make sure adjustment issues or little problems do not skyrocket into intractable ones and result in failed adoptions. And, finally, the job is easier if more lost animals are reclaimed by their families.

When someone calls to surrender their animal, many shelters fail to give them any more information than how they do so. But more successful shelters know that before a discussion of the process to surrender is had, they need to discuss *why* the person wants to do so and offer advice to help them keep their companion, if the person inquiring is inclined to do so. A study in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* found that targeted helpful advice that actually solves the problem results in a better than 90% decline in chances of relinquishment. At the Nevada Humane Society, their animal help desk, a central part of their pet retention program, fields over 20,000 calls a year. Of those who agreed to try and resolve their issues after calling to surrender their pet, 59% ended up not doing so.

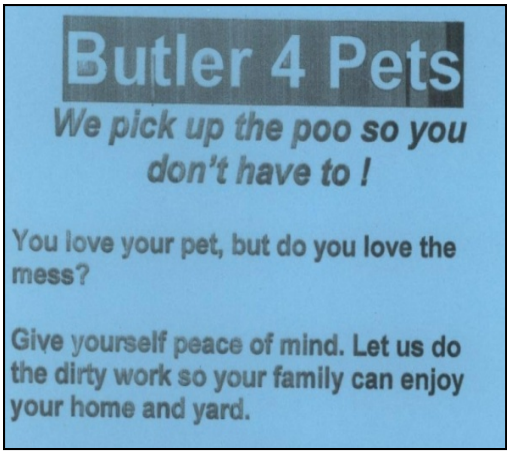
One of the most overlooked areas for saving lives is getting more lost animals back to their families. Unfortunately, shelters kill unclaimed strays blaming the "irresponsible" or "uncaring" public. In reality, the reasons why reclaim rates are low are more complex and all of them contribute to the number of lost dogs and cats who are never claimed by their families. These include poor 'lost and found' matching techniques, filing lost pet reports but not matching them with animals in the shelters, lack of diligence, killing animals too quickly before a match can be made, providing erroneous information about animal behavior, and giving the public a false assurance that once the report of a lost pet is made, the "owner" will be called when the animal is recovered. Beyond scanning animals for microchips, however, most shelters do very little to help people recover their lost pets. Worse yet, most shelter workers and pet owners have absolutely no idea how lost pets behave, the typical distances that they travel, and the best techniques that should be used to recover them, even though shelter staff should know this information and provide it to the public.

The result is that people get discouraged. People who are discouraged lose hope. People without hope give up searching. And lost pets are not recovered. It is this broken system that dominates sheltering in the United States today and it is time for a new approach. Washoe County Regional Animal Services has increased their redemption rate for lost dogs to 65% by being proactive, working hard, utilizing technology, and working diligently to get animals home in the field.

Imagine this: If a shelter takes in 10,000 stray dogs, on average 2,000 will be reclaimed. Another 500-700 will be killed (at this time in history) because they are hopelessly ill, irremediably suffering, or truly vicious dogs with a poor prognosis for rehabilitation. That leaves roughly 7,500 dogs competing with "owner-surrendered" dogs for homes.

Now imagine this: If the shelter worked more diligently as they do in Washoe County, they could reclaim 6,500 dogs, leaving only 3,500 dogs. If they then partnered with rescue groups and, on the "owned" animal side, employed a pet retention program, the total number of dogs needing homes would fall to below 1,000, a world of difference.

3. Get By with a Little Help from Your Friends



At the Tompkins County SPCA a few years ago, adopters received a free health examination at any local veterinarian of their choice, free grooming at a local pet salon, a 15% discount at a pet supply store, free behavior advice for life, a free month of someone picking up dog waste in their yard, a free engraved identification tag, a free bag of pet food, a 10% discount at a puppy obedience class, a 10% discount for a pet massage, the "Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Pet," a discount at the local coffee shop, and more. These were all donated by local businesses to encourage adoptions and gain customers—a classic "win-win."

But a shelter's biggest friends are rescue groups. Shelters are in the business of saving lives and like any business, successful shelters are rewarding their best customers by offering them special deals in return for their loyalty. That means giving something back to rescue groups, who typically save many animals every year. The deal: "any animal, any time."

4. Set Specific Goals and Celebrate Success

Goals have a way of uniting and inspiring people, so setting a specific adoption goal for each month allows shelters to measure success, plan accordingly, and modify as needed. And every success should be celebrated. According to the Nevada Humane Society, "We ring a bell and everyone pauses to applaud when each adoption is completed. It reminds us all of what we are doing here and it makes the pet adopter feel special."

5. Make the Shelter Fun and Inviting

Nothing makes a person feel welcome like a smile and hello, but getting people to stay and adopt can only be done by interaction with the animals. In other words, once you get them in the room, the animals do the rest. First, that means the shelter must remain clean. The smell of waste and filthy kennels undermines a smile and "hello" at the door. Shelters should set up play areas for cats, have lots of cat toys, and let people take them out of cages and interact with them. They should set up a doggy pool, have tennis balls and Frisbees, and invite the public to walk dogs and play with them, too. People will stay longer, interact more, and adopt more.

Old-school animal sheltering dogma advises minimizing public contact with animals, but it is human nature to want to make personal contact. Shelters should encourage the public to interact with the animals—to touch, spend time, and fall in love with them. Even if they do not adopt, the animals enjoy the attention. Studies show that the benefit of socialization and contact not only increases adoptions, but also decreases the animals' stress which makes them more resistant to disease.

6. Go on the Road

Most shelters are located in remote, out of the way parts of the community. In other words, they aren't located where people work, live, and play. In addition, many people think of shelters as sad and tragic places and may be reluctant to visit. So rather than wait for people to come to the shelter, successful shelters are taking the animals to the people. Over 20 years ago, the San Francisco SPCA created the nation's first offsite adoption program, setting up adoption locations throughout the city: at shopping malls, in the financial districts, at neighborhood gathering places. During its heyday, roughly one out of four animals were adopted offsite, and over the years, that has meant over 10,000 animals have found a home while being showcased outside of the shelter.

7. Marketing and Promotion

Out of sight is out of mind when it comes to where people get their next companion. In a shelter survey of adopters, 83% said they were influenced to adopt from the shelter by hearing about the organization: reading about them in the newspaper, seeing them at a local community event, finding them online, hearing about them on the radio, or word of mouth. Only 17% said adopting from them was their first choice or something they always knew they would do. To get more adoptions, the shelter must be in the public eye.

A shelter gets the message out on radio and television, in the newspaper, with posters and flyers, by speaking to community groups, and doing offsite adoptions. In one year, the shelter in Tompkins County was mentioned either on the radio, television, or a newspaper 409 times, averaging 37 stories per month, with a public relations budget close to zero.

Have fun, be creative, and the community will do the rest. And just as importantly in this day and age, *go viral*. Today, having a website is an indispensable part of any organization. But in sheltering, it isn't enough to save all the lives at risk. Seven out of ten internet users on social marketing websites like Facebook and Twitter. And if a shelter is not utilizing those social networks, it is missing out on an important market share for promoting their animals. According to Animal Ark shelter in Minnesota, a pioneer in this field, "The sharing of adoptable animals via social networking sites is viral marketing in its truest, purest and best form. It costs virtually nothing to get started, and the payoffs are tremendous: more and quicker adoptions, donations, and other support." But all the animals should have *names and photographs* to get the benefits of increased adoptions.

8. Not All Photographs and Descriptions are Created Equal

According to shelter directors who have tops-in-the-nation rates of lifesaving, there is no doubt that a good photograph that *shows off the animal's best qualities* advertised in a newspaper, a pet of the week ad, a flyer, or online will get people to the shelter to meet him or her. But it is the story that will close the deal. Rather than focusing on the basics: name, breed, age, and gender, the most successful shelters tell something about each animal: what they like, their favorite activities and treats, and even a little about their ideal home. In fact, PetRescue, an online adoption gateway in Australia, doesn't allow people to search by breed. Their philosophy is that people want to know what the dog is *like*, not what he is *supposed to be like* and they are trying to replicate the experience of going to a shelter and looking at all the dogs. And the payoff has been big: 65,000 animals have found a home through them.

Who is more likely to get adopted?

A dog described as a "Pit-mix" in a TX shelter

A dog described as a "Pit-mix" in a NV shelter

9. Be Reasonable

Some shelters think that by charging an arm and a leg, they guarantee good homes. But this is a mistake. A multi-state survey found that even waiving adoption fees did not reduce either the quality of the home, the strength of the bond, or the longevity of the adoption. It did find, however, that it greatly increased the number of adoptions. Why? People have lots of choices on where they can get an animal and price will influence their decision. In addition to the adoption fee, adopters have lots of other expenses such as collars, leashes, toys, and even a trip to the veterinarian.

Moreover, adoption policies should be thoughtful, not based on outdated myths. Before a cat, dog, rabbit, guinea pig, hamster, or other animal is killed while a home is being turned down, shelter managers should honestly ask themselves what they would want if they were the one facing the needle. Some shelter animals already have enough going against them: false perceptions that shelter animals are "damaged goods," poor shelter location, poor hours, poor customer service, a dirty and dilapidated facility. Shelters should not add unnecessary roadblocks like one rescue group in Pennsylvania which refuses to adopt to "unmarried cohabitating adults."

Ensuring a good home doesn't mean arbitrary rules, it doesn't require that potential adopters be grilled for an hour or to fill out a 10-page application. Americans have lots of choices when it comes to getting a new best friend, and when they make the decision to adopt from a shelter rather than going to more convenient places, like the local pet store, shelters shouldn't start out with the presumption they can't be trusted.

Screening may be an important part of the adoption process, but a rigid, bureaucratic undertaking is hardly necessary. By talking to and educating potential adopters rather than interrogating them, shelters can place animals in loving homes, without alienating people or making them feel like criminals.

10. Turn Challenges into Opportunities

At some point, every shelter experiences an extraordinary influx of large numbers of animals. The difference between those shelters who are successful and those who fail are the decisions made by those who run them. A shelter's options are only limited by imagination.

Imagination allowed a shelter which has a "capacity" of 375 but found itself with 750 animals due to a hoarding bust to empty its shelter without killing.

Imagination allowed an open admission shelter in New Zealand to triple its adoption rate overnight. And it allowed a Nevada shelter to more than double its number of adoptions on a weekend the Roads Department closed the street it was on for repairs. All by being creative, marketing animals, running promotions, and engaging the community.

Creating a Brighter Future

Imagine:

- ✓ Through your pet retention program, you reduce the number of people who surrender their animals after you help solve their problems by 59%.
- ✓ Through your proactive efforts to get strays home, you triple the percentage of dogs and increase seven-fold the percentage of cats being reclaimed by their families.
- ✓ Through your TNR program, many feral cats don't come into the shelter. Through your barn cat program, when they do, they go into barn homes.
- ✓ Through your low cost spay/neuter program, almost 70% of people with unsterilized animals get their animals altered.
- ✓ Through your partnerships with rescue organizations, your volunteer foster parents, and medical and behavior rehabilitation programs, animals are moving expeditiously through the system and into the care of the community.

And then, you turbocharge your adoption program. What would be the result? For the animals who remained in your shelter, you will have adopted your way out of killing.

You will have achieved a No Kill community.

No Kill
Advocacy Center

October 2010

Visit www.nokilladvocacyenter.org/reforming-animal-control.html to help end the killing in your community