

No-kill shelter nation? Maybe in 5 years

Adoptions rise as cities, shelters form partnerships to reduce euthanasia

By Kim Campbell Thornton

msnbc.com contributor

updated 5:59 a.m. PT, Thurs., July 9, 2009

When the Richmond SPCA in Virginia announced plans to become a no-kill animal shelter beginning in 2002, there was one thing that CEO Robin Starr didn't expect: vocal opposition from local rescue groups.

Opponents argued that the change would mean a disproportionate amount of unadoptable animals would end up at the city's animal control shelter — possibly leading to more animal deaths.

"It was sort of like we did a really good job of euthanizing animals, and it was our job, and we needed to see it as our place," Starr said. "I just didn't accept the notion that we were derelict in our duty if we didn't kill animals."

So the Richmond SPCA, a private organization, entered into a partnership with Richmond Animal Care and Control, the city's shelter, with the joint goal of ending the killing of healthy, homeless animals in the community.

The Richmond SPCA began limiting the animals it accepted, opened a spay/neuter clinic, implemented a foster care network and instituted new programs emphasizing adoption and responsible pet ownership. Richmond SPCA also created programs to help pets remain with their owners, including a pet food bank and animal behavior-training classes. Richmond Animal Care and Control, in turn, pledged to focus on public safety issues.

By 2006, two years ahead of schedule, the partners had achieved their goal: an adoption rate of 75 percent or more, with no more healthy but homeless animal dying in the city. That's up from a save rate of 56 percent in 2001.

"We're no-kill within the organization," Starr said. "And last year, our citywide euthanasia rate, including all animals taken in anywhere as homeless, was 19 percent, which I think puts us within the top few in the country."

In contrast, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals estimates that approximately 60 percent of dogs and 70 percent of cats entering shelters are euthanized each year, mostly due to a lack of space or resources to care for them.

Animals still may be euthanized when they are highly aggressive, severely injured or have an untreatable medical condition, says Jody Jones, operations manager for Richmond Animal Care and Control. However, she adds, "we have not euthanized a healthy adoptable animal since 2006."

A no-kill nation?

While no hard statistics are kept on the number of no-kill animal shelters in the U.S., the number does appear to be growing — and the number of animal adoptions rising in those cities.

Many cities, animal control agencies and private shelters in the U.S. are forming alliances that they hope will lead to a no-kill nation in half a decade.

The Nevada Humane Society based in Reno, Nev., adopted a no-kill policy in 2006. In less than a year, cat adoptions nearly doubled, from 2,100 in 2006 to 3,745 in 2007. Dog adoptions increased 51 percent, from 2,439 to 3,707.

Executive Director Bonney Brown credits the improved numbers to a focus on saving the lives of animals as well as a good relationship with Washoe County Regional Animal Services, which has one of the highest returned-to-owner rates in the nation — 65 percent of dogs and nearly 7 percent of cats.

"We've been blessed with the rescue groups in the community," Brown said. "They take animals that need a lot of extra care or behavioral rehabilitation."

Heavy reliance on volunteers, convenient shelter hours and fun community fundraising events — such as trick-or-treating for pets at Halloween and furry speed dating on Valentine's Day — have made a difference in Washoe County. Brown, who has a background in retail, runs the organization like a business.

"You look at what needs to be achieved and figure out how to do that. Maybe it means letting go of some programs that don't have a lifesaving impact or shifting the hours that the shelter is open," she said. "We've actually reduced our budget during the same time that we were achieving no-kill success."

At the Nevada Humane Society, the average length of stay for a dog is about 16 days; for cats, about 23 days. The organization also has improved its adoption screening and matching process.

"Animals that have been in the shelter longer are moved into the most prominent adoption places, and we make a push to get them out," she said.

However, not every community has the resources to form such partnerships that make no-kill shelters successful, says Misha Goodman, president of the National Animal Control Association and director of animal services for Iowa City, Iowa.

"Some locations in the country may have a very small shelter or animal control agency and not have the resources of local rescues or other shelters or humane societies," she says. "I'm in the Midwest, and I can tell you that it is hugely lacking agencies to deal with animal-related problems. There are a whole lot of rural areas that don't have accessibility to even the minimal amount of services."

'Every animal moves out of here'

Critics charge that no-kill shelters accept only the most adoptable animals, but Richmond SPCA's Starr refutes that. Unless animals are too sick or injured to recover to a quality life or are so aggressive that they are dangerous, "every animal moves out of here," she said.

And many shelters are coming up with innovative programs to facilitate adoptions of hard-to-place pets, such as older animals, pit bulls, and pets with disabilities or health problems.

"With older cats, we always do a reduced adoption fee," says Ken White, president of Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo, Calif. "And we work with a lot of senior advocacy groups. Older animals are sometimes a really excellent choice for older people."

Some organizations also tap donor-supported funds to help with medical bills even after adoption. Many share the animals' names and stories in an effort to make them more adoptable.

White firmly believes in giving every animal a chance at a home.

"We're diving deeper into our own local dogs and cats that have medical and behavioral problems and trying to make ready for adoption dogs and cats who in past years would have been euthanized immediately," he said.

Kim Campbell Thornton is an award-winning author who has written many articles and more than 20 books about dogs and cats. She belongs to the Dog Writers Association of America and is vice president of the Cat Writers Association. She shares her home in California with three Cavalier King Charles spaniels and one African ringneck parakeet.