

No More Homeless Pets Forum

Date: May 25 – June 1, 2007

Topic: Get Political for Animals and Win the Laws They Need

Get Political for Animals and Win the Laws They Need: That's the title of the new how-to manual by Julie E. Lewin, just published by the National Institute for Animal Advocacy. (Best Friends is among the book's sponsors.) She will answer your questions about how to win laws in your town, city, county or state that truly protect animals.

Introduction from Julie Lewin

Every one of us wants strong state laws and town, city and county ordinances and policies that truly prevent animals from suffering. From the volume of requests for advice I've received regularly from around the U.S. for two decades, it's clear that we have no notion of how to win them. We're blocked by false assumptions about the lawmaking process and squander our precious advocacy time, resulting in frustration and despair.

To pass strong state and local laws – and to get them enforced – we need to apply ourselves strategically, according to one fundamental fact: The lawmaking process and the arithmetic of elections are one and the same. Every lawmaker's top concern is to be re-elected. To be re-elected, the lawmaker must win a majority of votes cast on Election Day. Only political (voting bloc) organizations can make use of these facts.

Forming a voting bloc organization on the local level that mobilizes voters and endorses political candidates for local office can easily be done while still holding a day job. Animal rescue and animal rights charities can form affiliated political organizations. So few eligible voters bother to vote in local elections, we can easily threaten a lawmaker's winning margin of votes with very, very few advocates! Lawmakers' knowledge that we understand the arithmetic of elections, and how to use it to our advantage, will transfer us into power players for the animals. Laws that have been fantasies will be within reach. Every other social advocacy movement functions according to these facts, as do our opponents. For the animals' sake, we must, too.

In order to facilitate this transition, I just published a comprehensive "how-to" manual for animal rescue and rights advocates entitled *Get Political for Animals and Win the Laws They Need: Why and How to Launch a Voting Bloc for Animals in Your Town, City, County or State*. (Please see the Introduction and Table of Contents at www.nifaa.org.) The manual received funding from Animal Legal Defense Fund, Animal Welfare Trust, Animal World USA, Best Friends Animal Society, Coalition for Animals (New Jersey), Compassion in Entertainment, Connecticut Humane Society, Dogs Deserve Better, Farm Sanctuary, Fund for Animals, Humane Society of the U.S., Lapin Foundation, League of Humane Voters of New York City, and caring individuals.

The most dangerous assumption is that the merits of an issue are very important in determining the fate of legislation. In fact, when it comes to strong legislation, the merits are low on the list of importance. This week, I welcome your questions!

Bio for Julie Lewin

Julie Lewin is an animal rights activist, political trainer and campaign consultant. She's been an animal rights lobbyist, an animal rescuer, a political organizer and a nationally published journalist. For many years, Julie E. Lewin was Connecticut coordinator and lobbyist for The Fund for Animals, a national charitable organization.

For years, her daily routine involved changing her clothes after a day of lobbying in the state capitol, then driving a few blocks to rescue animals in Hartford, among the poorest cities in the U.S. She trapped feral cats behind abandoned buildings populated by drug addicts, and relocated TNR colonies.

Lewin launched NIFAA in 2002 to fill a critical void in the animal rights and rescue movements. Seasoned activists have described her training workshops as "a life-altering experience" and "the highest quality of instruction of all I've attended."

How to get animal laws enforced

Question from Lakota_gal: The problem in Oklahoma is that we have laws, but they are not enforced – not even close. The DAs (district attorneys) in the rural areas do not prosecute animal cruelty. One overworked DA (assigned to six counties) has told law enforcement not to bring him any cases regarding “animal cruelty crap.” There is no animal control in my county and they don't want calls unless there is a potential danger to humans. Frankly, where do I start? City areas are slightly better, but euthanasia rates are still high.

Response from Julie Lewin: Questions about enforcement are among my favorites, because of the importance to animals of enforcement and the lack of understanding about how to achieve it. In my workshops for advocates and in my new book, *Get Political for Animals and Win the Laws They Need*, I teach the need to understand where grassroots political power comes from. It's important to know if district attorneys and/or judges in your state are elected or appointed. The most important thing to lawmakers and other public officials is to hold onto their office. If elected to their positions, it's to be re-elected. If appointed, it's to maintain the support of those citizens who are kept informed about what they are doing, so they can maintain their political stature in the community.

Thus, forming a political voting bloc organization for animals in your state, county, city or town is without question the most effective means to win enforcement. Although the public doesn't realize it, all people in the public arena know that elections are won and lost by very few voters. They know that most people who can vote stay home, and that any voting bloc organization whose issue has broad appeal (like ours!) can motivate enough voters to come to the polls on Election Day – people who otherwise would have stayed home – to provide the winning margin in an electoral race.

Voting bloc organizations, not charities, can strategically apply themselves to influence lawmakers' and top officials' priority as stated above. They are accountability systems. A voting bloc organization has three main components:

- 1) Before voting on legislation or acting on a specific cruelty case, the official knows that the organization will inform its members in the jurisdiction of exactly what he/she did.
- 2) Before voting on legislation or deciding whether to act on a cruelty case, the lawmaker or official knows that, based on his or her record on the general issue, the voting bloc organization will endorse him or her for re-election or endorse his opponent.
- 3) The lawmaker or official knows that the voting bloc organization mobilizes voters who care about the issue, and that the organization can and will deliver votes to its endorsed candidate on Election Day.

If your district attorney is appointed rather than elected, he or she will take very strong notice of a political organization for animals and will afford it the respect it deserves.

It's essential to understand that even very small political organizations can become power players in the political arena. This is because all officials know that a political organization can bring people to the polls for its endorsed candidates. This is especially true at the town, city, and county levels. Because so few people ordinarily vote, a tiny number of voters could threaten the winning and losing margins in an election. And running a local political organization can be done by activists who have day jobs.

Get Political for Animals is a comprehensive how-to manual for animal rights and rescue advocates; it explains in detail every facet of functioning politically, including recruitment. Membership in your voting bloc organization can be a loose concept. You're simply looking for people in the jurisdiction who care enough about animals for it to possibly influence their voting behavior. Your organization will send them your endorsement choices and other information. The book includes heavy treatment of recruitment techniques.

Many activists complain that local animal control will not even bring cases to the district attorney. My book explains in detail how to achieve enforcement at this ground level. You follow the chain of command up to election officials. Say the animal control officer is appointed by the police chief, who is appointed by the town or county council. Councilors are elected. Councilors can demand of the police chief and animal control officer that they enforce cruelty and neglect laws and ordinances. So the political organization puts pressure on the councilors, by using enforcement as an electoral endorsement issue. It really, really works.

Of course, your voting bloc organization will spend most of its time pursuing strong local laws for animals. Laws are weak, so most of what we consider cruel treatment and report to authorities does not constitute violations of existing state laws and local ordinances. The animals need us to get political and form a local voting bloc organization to achieve stronger, more detailed local ordinances. I urge you to go to www.nifaa.org to learn more about my book, *Get Political for Animals and Win the Laws They Need*.

Insurance, bully breeds and politics

Question from Lakota_gal: Let's talk insurance, since so many homeowners and businesses that want to support all dog breeds frankly can't do so because of liability.

Is this a legal issue or more of an awareness issue? What can we do to change positions?

Response from Julie Lewin: This is an excellent topic which impacts some breeds of dogs throughout the U.S. Unfortunately, awareness seems to be going in the wrong direction, with insurance companies becoming more rather than less restrictive. But, well-crafted state legislation could require insurance companies to modify their criteria away from breed identification and toward dog behavior and conditions the dog is kept in

(for instance, fencing). The only way to wield power in the lawmaking arena that's equal to or greater than the insurance industry is through a statewide voting bloc organization that mobilizes humane voters and endorses political candidates running for the state legislature.

Again, the most important thing to lawmakers is to be re-elected. To be re-elected, the lawmaker needs to win a majority of votes cast on Election Day. Even tiny political organizations can become true power players by mobilizing voters and endorsing candidates. It's all about the arithmetic of elections. A small voting bloc organization need only be able to threaten the winning/losing margin in an electoral race to get a lawmaker in line. Concerned individuals and charitable organizations have no such power. The merits of legislation are low on the list of factors that determine the legislation's fate.

Example: In my state, licensed hunters are only 1½ percent of the population. Licensed trappers are only a fraction of 1 percent. Yet they control wildlife policy in the state, although many more people oppose recreational hunting and trapping. The reason they have the power and others don't is simple: They are highly political. Others are not political. They have a political organization that endorses candidates, and they get their people to the polls. Lawmakers do what they want because they fear that the tiny minority of hunters/trappers could determine the winning and losing margins in their next election bid. In comparison, animal welfare is a sleeping giant, and the animals continue to pay the price. (Lobbying per se is not being political, as lobbying for a charitable organization is confined pretty much to arguing the merits of legislation.)

It's not about the money. The hunters/trappers aren't powerful because they give campaign donations. In fact, when a lawmaker is voting on a piece of legislation, and must choose between a rich corporate interest and a politically organized grassroots organization, the latter wins every time. Why? Because only the latter can vote a lawmaker out of office.

Individual advocates can found a voting bloc organization, but on the state level, staff is important. Some states have established, endowed charitable organizations for animals. These could form affiliated political organizations. Animal Protection Voters of New Mexico is such an organization, a young affiliate of an established statewide animal charity. For the animals' sake, we must become political.

What about harmful laws?

Question from Madelyn: I have read many well-thought-out pieces that say many laws actually harm animals more. For instance, pet limit laws or cat licensing laws tend to

increase the number of cats euthanized in shelters. What would you say to those who see increased laws as detrimental?

Response from Julie Lewin: Some laws such as those you describe may increase the number of animals who are euthanized. It is important for advocates to think out the practical effects of any law or ordinance. My own direct experience stems from the years I rescued cats daily in inner-city Hartford, one of the poorest cities in the U.S.

Local ordinances requiring breeding bans, required sterilization, and cat licensing were being promoted by many activists. Such ordinances in Hartford, if enforced, would have resulted in mass roundups of cats. In the neighborhoods I rescued in, many residents (who tried to subsist on public assistance) didn't have cars, or enough income to provide enough food for their own families as the end of the month drew near.

So in Hartford, where the incidence of homeless and feral cats is endemic, such ordinances and policies would need to be complemented by full funding (from the city or rescue organizations) for sterilizations and other basic veterinary care – and transportation to and from veterinary facilities. I had a fantasy of obtaining massive funding for what I called a “Humane Hartford” project.

It would consist of brightly illustrated mobile veterinary spay/neuter vans which would roam the city. It would have two storefronts – one on each of the two low-income areas' main streets. There would be a library, which would be ideal for children to stop by after school and use for school papers on humane issues. Thus, it would be “in your face” exposure to animal advocacy issues.

Of course, in the real world of many areas, such harmful laws would not be enforced anyway, as animal control does not have the resources, staff, facilities or budget to do so. So, it could be a moot point.

As for laws and ordinances other than those that pertain to overpopulation of cats and dogs, for the most part I feel that we must get political, so we can win strong laws and ordinances that protect animals from suffering and abuse at the hands of humans. I define a strong law as one that:

- 1) Substantially, even drastically, raises the legal minimum standards of care for animals
- 2) Bans some practices and uses of animals outright
- 3) Or makes it easier for humans to gain legal standing in court on behalf of animals

All such laws have strong opposition, and in most cases powerful, corporate opposition and/or opposition from politically organized grassroots groups. We are no match for such opposition now. But we could have more power than they do. The way to achieve such strong laws is to have voting bloc organizations that mobilize humane voters and endorse political candidates. Every other issue group understands that this is the only way to become power players in the lawmaking arena, and pursues laws, ordinances, and public policies through voting bloc organizations.

All aspects of this subject, including exactly how to form and maintain a voting bloc for animals in your community, are explained in detail in my book, *Get Political for Animals and Win the Laws They Need*.

Definitions and specifics likely to be enforced

Question from Sheryl: Enforcement is also a problem in Vermont, which is said to have comparatively progressive laws protecting animals. Can you offer strategies for creating laws and ordinances so that they are more likely to be enforced? And what about for existing laws?

Response from Julie Lewin: Generally, the more specific the law or ordinance, the easier it is to be enforced (if the enforcement agency has a will to do so, or if a local voting bloc organization requires it). For example, many basic, anticruelty laws prohibit harassing an animal. Yet rodeos are never cited. Some laws prohibit the use of captive wildlife in entertainment, yet circuses exploit elephants and tigers, and aquariums train dolphins to do tricks. So a law or ordinance might need to include phrases or definitions that would apply to the animals. Many cruelty and neglect laws vaguely prohibit "cruel treatment" or require "adequate shelter." Adequate for what?

In some local jurisdictions (towns, cities, counties), ordinances on many subjects are often vague – it's how it's done there. They also create a ceiling rather than a floor. For example, if a law or ordinance required all dogs kept outside to have doghouses in the cold or in inclement weather, is the rest of the law adequate to protect puppies or old, thin or unhealthy dogs, who need much more warmth? Or would the requirement be interpreted to mean that any dog can be left outside no matter how severe the weather as long as there is access to a doghouse? Or would a phrase such as "Provided the structure is adequate to house the dog without discomfort" help (although it, too, is vague)?

As far as existing laws, they can be altered ("amended"), as above, by enacting another law or ordinance. But as in all strong legislation, a voting bloc organization in the jurisdiction is the way to do either. The more specific or restrictive a piece of proposed legislation, the more powerful opposition it will have.

Party leaders who bully rank-and-file legislators

Question from Susan: I have just ordered your book by mail. Can you send it yesterday? This is probably covered in the book, but what advice do you have for dealing with a Republican caucus that has advised state legislators who are Republicans to vote against a particular bill? Republicans are notorious for holding back progress for animal welfare. As a Republican myself, I have been trying to change this from the inside.

Response from Julie Lewin: Very often a leadership of a party caucus that is within the lawmaking body decides that the entire caucus will make a united front for or against a piece of controversial legislation. Rank and file lawmakers (those who do not hold leadership positions within their party's caucus) within that party who may want to vote the other way are afraid to do so. This is because leadership has many major punishments and rewards it can inflict or bestow on rank-and-filers.

The way around this dilemma is simple, once you understand that the most important thing to a lawmaker is to be re-elected. This is true also of those holding leadership positions. And once you absorb the fact that any lawmaker, no matter how powerful in

the lawmaking arena, is re-elected – or defeated – by his or her own constituents who vote.

The solution: The voting bloc organization prioritizes the districts of lawmakers in leadership positions. The group recruits members (humane people who may be influenced by the group's endorsement choices) heavily in those districts.

My book has a much more detailed discussion of the phenomenon you describe and how to overcome it. I'm so glad you want it "yesterday" and ordered it already! For others who are interested in ordering the book, please go to www.nifaa.org.

Law-passing workshops and more

Question from Alethia: Hi Julie, I am very interested in this topic. I live in a farming/ranching area. Last year I was introduced to the "Bare Minimum" law when advocating for an animal. A lightbulb moment ..."Oh, it's the laws that need to change!!" How can I learn more, get the book and find out about your workshops? How about folks in my area who might already be aligned with you? Have you heard of Karen Breslin? I have her name as a Denver animal rights attorney.

Response from Julie Lewin: I'm so very glad you've gotten the fever! Without it, political advocacy for animals will never happen. You can order the book through www.nifaa.org. I will give a NIFAA workshop anywhere that people will host me.

I don't know animal rights attorney Karen Breslin. However, one of the funders of *Get Political for Animals and Win the Laws They Need* was the Animal Legal Defense Fund, whose president, Paul Leonard, agrees with NIFAA. Previously he was mayor of Dayton, Ohio, and then state representative and then lieutenant governor. He is quoted in the book in a sidebar interview. He talks about how he doesn't understand why animal advocates want strong laws to protect animals, but "suffer a political disconnect."

Another attorney quoted in the book is Sunny Simon, a member of the South Euclid, Ohio, town council. She's a committed animal rights activist who says that local political action is the most effective means to bring change.

How about contacting Ms. Breslin about putting a training event together (and make sure she's heard about the book)?

Please be sure to stay in touch and let me know how things develop!

How do I set up and maintain a voting bloc?

Question from Rick: How does one go about recruiting for a voting bloc? And is there a lot of paperwork involved in getting set up?

Response from Julie Lewin: I'm so pleased with your questions. Aggressive, continuous recruitment must always be the number one activity of a voting bloc organization, because its power in the lawmaking arena is equivalent to the size of its membership. In my book, *Get Political for Animals*, I emphasize, "If you're not always in the midst of an aggressive recruitment campaign, you're not doing your job." I

emphasize that in deciding how to apportion every 15 minutes, half hour, hour or day of advocacy time an activist has to spend, the activist must weigh any use of time other than recruitment against how many new members she/he could have found during that time.

Let me interrupt myself to define “member”: For the purposes of a voting bloc organization, a member is anyone who has a soft spot for animals, who lives in the

jurisdiction, and whose voting behavior might be influenced positively by the endorsement choices of the organization.

Methods: In my book I discuss many easy, straightforward methods to reach your intended audience. In brief: E-mail forwarding, tabling, voter registration tables, door-to-door canvassing, political organizing parties, renting or exchanging other local animal group lists, website links, and dessert socials at your house, to which every advocate must bring 20 names, addresses and contact information of humane people in the jurisdiction.

Cold calls to lists of voters in the jurisdiction (available through Freedom of Information acts) can be marvelous. And it's very efficient: If you have only 10 minutes, you can make a couple of calls. My book includes scripts for such calls.

I also emphasize recruitment in high schools for first-time 18-year-old voters and discuss methods to accomplish this.

Paperwork for setting up a political organization: It depends. In most places and cases, establishing a political action committee requires filling out only a simple form that includes a president and treasurer. My book devotes a whole chapter to this question. For example, the first step for an existing animal rights or rescue charity should apply to the IRS to form a 591(c)(4) political lobbying organization, which legally can lobby heavily, mobilize voters, and endorse candidates. However, a few board members of a charity can form an independent political action committee by filling out the simple form, as above.

Success story in action!

Submission from Elaine: I have talked with Julie in the past and wanted to pass on a success story: We have a small community that for the past 2 years has included a "Non-greased Pig Chase" contest for young and adult dimwits. The first year, the paper ran a story describing how much fun everyone had and the adults' body-slammng techniques. It drew a lot of outrage and we made phone calls to everyone involved, but they promised to continue the new "tradition," labeling us PETA whackos. An elderly AR (animal rights) woman was there the second year and made a sign saying to stop the cruelty and she was ejected by the police from the event.

We mobilized the network of animal people and made calls to the county commissioners and the animal control agency. We did a presentation before the commission task force and a new law is being drafted which not only outlaws pig chases, but also makes "Hog/Dog Rodeos" a felony.

Getting people to take action and make calls, send e-mails and write letters works!
Thanks, Julie!

Response from Julie Lewin: Dear Elaine, This is fabulous! To exponentially increase the chances that the proposed legislation will be strong and will be approved by the county commissioners, I urge you to organize politically – NOW – by county council district.

Use politically designed petitions as shown in my book. A separate petition will be addressed to each county commissioner, and only his or her constituents will sign. And organize in other simple ways that the book describes. The proposed legislation has several major hurdles ahead. Please let me know how it goes! You can find out more about the book and order it through www.nifaa.org.

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