

From Animal Control to Animal Care

One county shows how it's done



Ed Boks, of Maricopa Animal Care and Control, with Tommy

Animal control. In many communities, the term still screams “Dog Catcher!” And everyone knows what that means! It’s no surprise that rescue groups – and even the public – have had an uneasy relationship with city or county facilities where the solution to the homeless animal problem is often a very final one.

But the No More Homeless Pets ethos is spreading, and just as humane societies are moving rapidly to end the killing, so are a growing number of animal control departments looking to transform their traditional role.

A former pastor, Ed Boks, the head of Animal Care and Control in Maricopa County (which includes Phoenix), Arizona, has brought a radically new approach to his job and implemented a series of programs that together are bringing a new viewpoint and mission to animal care and control.

In November 2002, and after several years of preparation, a coalition of Maricopa County rescue groups, shelters, and veterinarians qualified for the first installment of a five-year, \$6 million grant from Maddie’s Fund to help bring an end altogether to the killing of healthy homeless pets.

Without Boks’s new concept of animal control, this enormous step forward would not have been possible.

Best Friends sat down with him for a chat about the role animal control can play in a community inspired to reach for new heights in helping animals.

Best Friends: *You’ve said that animal control should be the leader in the no-kill movement, rather than being dragged into it kicking and screaming.*

EB: Absolutely! I think that in every community, animal control is uniquely positioned to be the leader. Since we play the unfortunate role of having to euthanize homeless animals, we provide each community with a benchmark for determining how well they are treating their animals.

So, the attention of every community should be focused on driving down the number of animals dying in the local animal control facility. There is a big difference between creating a no-kill shelter and creating a no-kill community. The animals dying in a local animal control shelter is the best indicator of how well or poorly the humane organizations are doing.

BF: *Traditionally, the humane society was set up to protect animals from people, and animal control was set up to protect people from animals. Things have obviously progressed since then. What should the relationship between the humane society and animal control be now?*

EB: I think humane societies sprang up across the U.S. because animal control departments were derelict in doing what the community really wanted them to do. Citizens saw the gap and said, “The government isn’t meeting our expectations, so we’d better do it ourselves.”

As animal control departments across the country step up to the plate and begin to provide the services the community expects, the need for separate humane societies will diminish.

BF: *What's the most important element in what you're doing?*

EB: I like to see the focus on aggressive spay/neuter programs. Our Big Fix program provides free or low-cost spay/neuter services for the pets of anybody on public assistance.

The Big Fix has two components. First, we do between 10 and 20 spays or neuters every day for these people.

Second, we host a quarterly spay day. This event has taken on the feel of a rock concert! People line up in our parking lot the night before, sleeping in their sleeping bags so they'll be first in line. Because we can only do the first 200 pets at each event, we've been forced to turn hundreds of people away. I hope that with the Maddie's Fund grant, the veterinary community will now join us in meeting this tremendous demand.

The low-income people in our community have a very strong bond with their pets. They want to do the right thing; it's just that a lot of the time they can't afford to. When you provide this service, they do the right thing, and bring their pets in to be altered.

BF: *What about feral cats?*

EB: We have a trap/neuter/return (TNR) program to reduce the number of feral cats in our community. It's called Operation FELIX, which stands for Feral Education and Love Instead of X-termination.

About 10,000 ferals a year come through our shelters, and it was getting worse. Then a local newspaper ran some stories on one city's preference for "catch-and-kill" to solve its feral cat problems. Although that city has since stopped catch-and-kill, it still hasn't adopted TNR. But the *community* gets it. And our local county board of supervisors was the first government body that I'm aware of to have declared TNR and Operation FELIX the preferred method for feral cat control in Maricopa County.

BF: *Who makes Operation FELIX happen? The people in the community or your staff?*

EB: Both. We work with a wonderful organization called AZ Cats, and with some other groups, too. Their volunteers trap the cats and bring them to us, and we do the neutering. We hold a quar-

terly feral cat spay day, where we alter 200 feral cats.

For a while, we were also doing Feral Fridays, but AZ Cats was able to find local veterinarians to provide this service. We are more than willing to do it, but if we can find local support like that, then we can tackle other problems.

BF: *The Big Fix has been in operation for a little over a year. Has it affected the number of animals being put down yet?*

EB: Well, for the first 15 years that I was here, we were rescuing more than 60,000 animals a year. Last year we saw our first decrease in years. We rescued 58,000 animals, and we attribute the decline to our spay/neuter and education programs. Our euthanasia rate dropped from 30 animals for every 1,000 residents to nine. That's a two-thirds reduction. And we're hoping to see some even more dramatic trends in the next two or three years.

“Ed Boks is pioneering a whole new way of looking at animal control. The concept is wonderful, and I hope it catches on.”

— Lorraine Moule, President of the National Animal Control Association

Our adoptions have gone up, too. We went from about three or four adoptions for every 1,000 residents to nearly eight. We find homes for nearly 22,000 animals a year, making us the number one pet adoption agency in the world.

There's a book called *The Tipping Point* which explains how an idea spreads. I think that on a societal level, we have reached a tipping point – where all the work, all the energy, blood, sweat, and tears that we've devoted to animal welfare over the last two decades is starting to pay off.

We're seeing light at the end of the tunnel.

BF: *Talk some more about your adoptions. Don't you have the first municipal no-kill adoption center?*

EB: Right. Our Pet Adoption Center opened in October 1999. It was an abandoned Department of Motor Vehicles building that the county was in the process of selling when I found it. I thought



no more homeless pets

it would make a great off-site adoption center, so we acquired it.

Then word got out that we were going to create a municipal no-kill shelter, and three foundations offered to help.

It's a wonderful location with two parks: a Get Acquainted Park, where people can take dogs outside and play with them and get to know them, and a Dog Obedience and Agility Park, where we partner with some local organizations to provide obedience and agility training.

BF: *How do you fund all your programs?*

EB: Our animal control program is budgeted through our contracts with the cities and towns. In Arizona, animal control is expected to be self-sufficient. We don't get any county funding. The only revenue we raise for our animal control program is from the services we provide, and we cannot make a profit.

But most communities want quality animal care services, too. So, for our animal care side, we developed our own 501(c)3 charity, called Friends of Animal Care and Control, to raise money for animal welfare programs. Friends allows the community to be involved in making a difference in their local animal control program. By developing our own charity, we've been able, with the help of our community, to become a premier animal control and animal welfare organization. We strive to provide exceptional services both to the citizens and the animals of our community.

BF: *Do you think city governments should be putting more money into helping animal control?*

EB: Historically, animal control services are a low priority [in government]. And in the current fiscal climate, the idea that municipalities should be spending more is not going to fly. They just don't have the money. It's that simple. We're in difficult times right now.

I think that if we view Maricopa County as a model, it shows that there are lots of people in every community who care very deeply and are willing to help with donations and grants. I don't think we have to tax people more to solve this problem. When the community comes together and solves the problem, everyone feels good about it. But when you start taxing people, you have a whole lot of people who don't feel good about it. I think we can solve this problem through creative thinking and innovative programs.

BF: *You have a rather unique program to help with adoptions.*

EB: That's our New Hope Program. We have a very dedicated and compassionate staff, but we all recognized that we needed help from the rescue groups. So we set up a contractual agree-

ment with over 60 local organizations that has allowed us to expand our adoption program beyond our four walls.

In the first year, we placed about 500 animals through New Hope. This last year, we placed over 3,500 animals.

BF: *How does it work?*

EB: An animal is placed on our euthanasia list for one of three reasons: We exhausted all of our resources and were still unable to place the animal, or we were inundated with so many animals that we had to move the animal to make room for incoming, or the animal is not adoptable due to health or temperament.

Keep in mind, we rescue between 150 to 200 a day, so it doesn't take much for us to run out of space.

So, each day we notify our New Hope partners of the animals on the euthanasia list, and then anyone who's interested can come down. They actually adopt the animal from us at no charge. We waive the adoption fee, the spay/neuter fee, the license fee, and the license transfer fee. That way, they can maximize their resources to care for and place these animals into loving homes. And the free transfer fee allows them to transfer that license to the new family at no charge. So the new family gets a free license for the remainder of that year.

BF: *Many rescue groups have a traditionally contentious relationship with animal control because some of those agencies really are resistant to change. How do you get on with the National Animal Control Association?*

EB: Very well. We are a member of NACA, and I served on the board of directors until just recently. I think I was something of an enigma to some of the other members until I had the opportunity to explain my vision. Then lots of them told me I was saying what they had always believed to be true.

Sure, there was some resistance to my way of thinking, but I attributed that to the old "us vs. them" paradigm – animal welfare vs. animal control. If you can break out of that mind set and realize we are all in this together, then all the difficulties disappear.

BF: *You have said, "Who can argue with the concept of no-kill?" So how did things get to be the way they are, with so many animal control departments and officers being so suspicious of the no-kill movement?*

EB: I think that in many communities, as animal welfare, humane societies, and no-kill organizations developed, they viewed animal control as not doing the job. And rather than seeing what they could do to help, they decided to do their own thing. They





came in with some very lofty and noble goals and aspirations – being no-kill or being the “humane” society as opposed to animal control.

So by implication and inference, animal control becomes the inhumane animal killers who are not doing the job. Often-times, the community hasn’t made it clear to the decision makers in our municipalities that animal control and care is important and that they want it to be funded appropriately. So animal control becomes defenseless, an easy target, and it’s difficult to correct these misperceptions.

It’s really unfortunate, because the people in the animal control organizations and the people in these nonprofit organizations are all trying to do the same thing.

BF: *What do you want to say to folks in animal control across the country who are still suspicious?*

EB: I would say, “Get ahead of the curve.” I totally understand the negative reaction. It’s natural when you’re under attack. But rather than just reacting, embrace humane groups and find ways to maximize each other’s resources, because we’re all trying to do the same thing.

Find out the goals and strategic plans of those organizations, because they’ve identified what the community wants. Their donations depend on knowing what the community wants. People give freely to those organizations because they are doing what the community wants. So, do what they’re doing. Find out what your community wants, and develop programs to meet their demands.

Your community will reward you by supporting your efforts. If you only focus on what your state mandates you to do, you will always be in a reactive mode, because your community has evolved way beyond what your legislature mandated you to do five, 10, or 20 years ago.

Rather than try to explain why “no-kill” is not a good term and being offended by it, make it your own. We said this is who we are, and this is the direction we’re moving. And the community responded. I believe this would work in every community.

BF: *Are you the model for how animal control can progress all over the country?*

EB: I don’t think we are *the* model but we are *a* model. It’s working in our community, and it’s a model that could be replicated in other communities.

I’d like to go into other communities and set up a team of like-minded people and try to replicate this in other communities. Right now, we provide advice to animal control programs all across the

U.S. We give suggestions and advice and consultation freely to anybody who’s open to listening to us.

BF: *Are there other places where animal control officers are leading the way?*

EB: There are a couple of places in Florida: Alachua and Miami-Dade counties. I’m sure there are many we don’t know about.

BF: *What do you say to people who insist that it won’t work in their community – that the city just won’t accept it?*

EB: Animal care and control is more a vocation than it is a job. You have to be motivated to do what is in your heart and what you know in your heart is right. If you get fired for that, then at least you were fired for fighting the good fight. And you move on. You’ll find another way to do it in your community, or you will find another community that will respond to your vision.

I would tell them they’re not out of step with what this country is expecting. Every day, we’re moving closer to achieving it. 🐾

For more information, go to www.maricopa.gov/pets.

Arizona’s Big Fix

The Big Fix is amazing to see. People line up the night before so that they can get a place for the next morning. It’s offered on a first-come, first-served basis and we can only do 200 in a day.

A father and daughter told me an amazing story about something that happened to them as they stood in line. They were there at midnight and some gang kids came and ran them off. They were really scared but they did NOT want to lose their place in line so they hid a little ways off and watched until the gang was gone. Then they got back in line! They were so brave! It meant that much to them. It also indicates that there is such a great need for this.

So often in the past, we felt that the public didn’t understand the importance of spaying and neutering. Now we’re seeing something very different. It is not all irresponsible pet owners out there. We just have to try and make it easier for them to get this service. We’re seeing that...if you build it, they will come!

– Julie Bank, Director of Public Programs,
Maricopa County Animal Care & Control