

Sheltering Is Pointless ... Until the Need Is Reduced

From Animal People, November 2003

“We live in a deeply depressed, impoverished, remote and backward corner of the far side of hell,” someone laments to us almost every day. “We have never had low-cost or free pet sterilization and vaccination, let alone a neuter/return program for feral cats and street dogs. People poison or shoot dogs and cats with impunity. The dogcatcher sells dog meat, dog leather, cat pelts, and live animals for use in laboratories. Millions of animals are in urgent need. Please help us fund a shelter to house 100 of them.”

Such pleas are heartrending, but under such circumstances, either operating or funding a shelter is pointless, mindless, and likely to only rearrange the misery in that particular part of hell’s overcrowded and starving half acre. No humane society anywhere should even think about starting a shelter until and unless it receives a gift or bequest of the land and money needed to build and run the shelter without diverting resources from sterilization, vaccination, and public education.

Later, if sterilization, vaccination, and public education are successful, starting the right kinds of shelter at the right times might represent worthwhile expansions of the mission. But until the numbers of homeless dogs and cats are markedly reduced, and until the public shows increased sympathy and tolerance toward them, putting funds into shelter work makes less sense than using money as cat litter.

Fortunately, putting sterilization, vaccination, and public education first is the least costly way to get started. Public education can begin with as little as one volunteer sharing knowledge by word-of-mouth. Providing low-cost or free sterilization and vaccination requires paying veterinarians, which necessitates fundraising, but does not require building or buying a clinic, of either the fixed-site or mobile variety, until the funds become available.

Other than hiring vets, the most useful investment a sterilization and vaccination program can make will usually be in providing transportation to relay animals to and from the veterinarians, on behalf of elderly, disabled, and poor people who have no transportation of their own. If volunteers with vehicles are not available, vans can be rented as needed.

Street dog catching and feral cat trapping for sterilization and vaccination can likewise be done by volunteers, if necessary.

This work must come before sheltering, because whether or not petkeepers can afford sterilization and vaccination, or are responsible enough to do it, it still needs to be done. Ignoring that need is like ignoring that a neighbor’s house is on fire just because you happen to know that he smokes in bed. Ideally the neighbor can be educated into more responsible behavior, but either way the fire must be extinguished.

If sterilization and vaccination is properly promoted, and humane education is successful, a community will never need conventional animal control shelters.

The most successful approach to preventing dog and cat overpopulation in impoverished and remote areas that *Animal People* has ever seen is the “No-kill, no-shelter” concept pioneered in Costa Rica by Alex Valverde, DVM, Gerardo Vicente, DVM, and Christine Crawford, founder of the McKee Project. We think enough of it that we recently sponsored Dr. Vicente to address the Asia for Animals conference in Hong Kong and then do a speaking tour of India.

Vicente, like Valverde, is a past president of the Costa Rican Veterinary Licensing Board. His background is in public health. From that background and perspective, Vicente emphasizes that without community support, nothing can be accomplished. The public must understand a successful anti-pet overpopulation project, and must feel inspired to cooperate with it. This excludes the blame-the-public attitudes and rhetoric that persist among too many animal rescuers, especially those who maintain shelters as a perceived bastion against a cruel and uncaring world that they seldom actually try to engage.

Vicente proudly points out that Costa Rica has no animal control shelters, has closed those it once had, and does not want or need any more. As Vicente explains, shelters of any kind take a lot of money to build and run. Even the U.S., spending \$2 billion a year on animal sheltering, between public and nonprofit investment, does not yet have complete shelter coverage of every community.

Indeed, after more than 125 years of shelter-building, half of the rural counties in the U.S. still have no shelter, public or private – and shelter-building has meanwhile proved futile, because enough shelter space can never be built to contain every dog and cat without a home so long as dogs and cats breed freely or are intentionally bred.

Nor is it possible to lastingly reduce dog and cat numbers by killing the surplus. The U.S. amply demonstrated that fallacy during the 20th century, catching and killing more dogs and cats in shelters than the probable sum of all the dogs and cats who were eaten in the whole of Asia. Only in the past 12 years has U.S. shelter killing fallen below that appalling volume.

No matter how many dogs and cats are killed, the fertile remainder can always breed rapidly up to the carrying capacity of the habitat, somewhere between becoming a public nuisance and suffering actual starvation.

Poor areas, rural areas, and developing nations, Vicente emphasizes, cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the rich. Animal shelters will always become death camps and slaughterhouses, Vicente points out, if dog and cat reproduction is not controlled before the shelters are built.

If the population is controlled, which must always be the first priority, the relatively few animals who require special care could be housed as efficiently in all but the biggest cities by shelterless nonprofit humane societies, using foster homes or boarding facilities.

This is especially true of remote and rural areas, where the distance to be traveled to a centrally located shelter tends to become an incentive to dumping animals instead.

Rather than spending money to run a shelter in any community which lacks the concentrations of donors and adoptors to make sheltering economically viable, animal rescuers need to set up networks which enable the nearest rescuer to collect any animal who is being surrendered, or may be redeemed and rehomed with reasonable effort after pickup by government animal control, and then deliver the animal to the most appropriate foster home.

The coordinating office needs no more than a desk, a telephone, Internet service, the know-how to ensure that participating foster homes furnish quality care, and the fundraising capacity to help the fostering volunteers cover their costs, including the costs of immediately sterilizing and vaccinating all incoming animals.

Adoptions can be arranged in at least four ways without any need to have a shelter:

- By using the adoption programs of pet supply superstores such as PETsMART, and Petco, wherever they exist.
- By arranging frequent adoption events at other heavily frequented public places.
- By using a web site with photos to help advertise the availability of the animals.
- By partnering with a high-volume adoption center in a big city which can place puppies, kittens, and otherwise easily adopted animals.

These days many U.S., Canadian, and western European big-city shelters have a shortage of highly adoptable animals, though still no scarcity of hard cases. Remote and rural animal rescuers, however, along with those in other parts of the world, are still receiving huge numbers of puppies, kittens, and small dogs. Transferring these animals to adoption centers, in exchange for sterilization funding, helps everyone, and enables the adoption centers to compete successfully for "market share" against pet shops and puppy mills that sell unsterilized, unvaccinated animals.

When and How to Build a Shelter

After successful sterilization, vaccination, and humane education programs are underway, expanding into sheltering should begin with establishing an adoption center. An adoption center is a shelter of sorts, but the most successful are more like fashionable boutiques than shelters in the conventional sense, displaying relatively small numbers of adoptable dogs and cats in a convenient location, where it is easy for them to attract notice, be happy, healthy, and comfortable, and – while awaiting adoption – get whatever training they may need to succeed in a home.

The adoption center should not be used for long-term care, nor for large numbers of animals, since offering too many animals tends to leave prospective adopters unable to choose. If animals cannot be placed quickly, they do not belong in an adoption center.

The idea behind an adoption center is to help reduce the numbers of animals in custody, and help fill vacant niches in homes with sterilized, vaccinated animals. Animals who are not promptly adopted should be rotated off exhibit and back to foster care to de-stress.

A successful adoption program – or shelter program of any kind – cannot operate from dreary rows of parasite-infested stinking-out-loud steel-and-cement cages beside the town dump. Placing animals in good homes requires treating them as if they have value. Treat animals as if they have value, and people will want them – and the way a humane organization treats animals will be perceived, by default, as the community standard of pet care.

Bear in mind that dogs and cats do not go kennel-crazy from being in a shelter too long. Rather, they go kennel-crazy because mad scientists whose sole object was to drive dogs and cats insane probably could not devise an instrument to do it more effectively than the typical traditional shelter. The standard cement-floored, cement-and-chain-link walled, tin-roofed dog run is an atrocity, whose basic design came from the spare horse stalls in which hunting packs were kept during the Middle Ages.

Dogs need compatible companions, they need room to run, they need security from being stared at strange dogs, they need outdoor air and light, and many have a reflexive urge to dig, especially when stressed. Give a dog what a dog needs, and it is very easy to keep dogs happy and healthy. Deprive a dog of any of these things, and you will soon have sick and despairing dogs. Teach a community to deprive a dog of these things, and you will have a community full of maladjusted dogs being surrendered to shelters or dumped on the street.

Cats need to be able to climb – and they prefer quiet. There is no animal easier to care for than a cat. Even great apes in zoos often keep pet cats successfully – and so has at least one now deceased grizzly bear.

Unfortunately, great apes and the occasional bear seem to have a better sense of what a cat needs than many shelter directors. Too often *Animal People* visits humane societies full of nervous, panic-stricken, and sneezing, runny-eyed cats, sometimes confined to sterile laboratory-style cells the size of a microwave oven, who have to listen to kennel-crazed dogs barking around the clock.

If the ancient Egyptians were right that human beings will face a cat on Judgment Day, many a shelter director may be passing a very hot eternity.

If dogs and cats are kept in a facility that looks like a jail, smells like a cesspool, and sounds like hell in full cry, dogs and cats for miles around will be treated like doomed souls on a chain-gang, because the condition of the shelter sends the message that the humane community considers this okay. Treat dogs and cats as honored visiting friends, conversely, and the community standards will rise to that standard.

Finally, after a community has effective outreach sterilization, vaccination, and humane education programs, and adoption facilities that place every animal who can be quickly placed, and after the resources become available to do more, it is worthwhile to start a care-for-life sanctuary as a backup to the rest of the system. This is for the relatively few animals who cannot be adopted, when all other components of no-kill animal control are up and running.

People give up pets for many reasons. Whether or not we think the reasons are “valid,” giving up pets is a fact of life which must be accommodated.

Many are given up not because they are not loved, but because desperate people feel they have no choice: they have lost their job, lost a home, an animal has bitten or scratched a child, the spouse hates the animal, the landlord is threatening to evict them, or the pet-keeper has died.

If the people feel that a pet is going to either find a home or be well looked after at a sanctuary, they will bring the animal into the adoption-and-care network. The animal will not end up being abandoned in the misguided hope that the animal “will have a better chance” than if brought to a shelter that routinely kills “unadoptables.”

Animal control agencies that can respond immediately to nuisance animal complaints and act as a dog-and-cat lost-and-found are nice to have. So are full-service humane societies that can provide emergency veterinary care, do humane education, do animal rescue, and investigate cruelty complaints, all under one roof.

They are not, however, what it takes to end dog and cat overpopulation.

Animal People, founded in 1992, is the leading independent newspaper providing original investigative coverage of animal protection worldwide. Their readership of 30,000-plus includes the decision makers at more than 9,500 animal protection organizations. They have no alignment or affiliation with any other entity.

For more information:

Merritt Clifton
Editor, Animal People
P.O. Box 960
Clinton, WA 98236

Phone: (360) 579-2505
Fax: (360) 579-2575
E-mail: anmlpepl@whidbey.com
Website: www.animalpeoplenews.org