The Lifesaving Matrix

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For well over a century, the killing of animals has been a central strategy of most SPCAs, humane societies and animal control facilities which contract with cities and towns to run shelters for animals who are stray or no longer wanted.

To shelters mired in reactionary philosophies, an "unadoptable" animal is interpreted very broadly. Some shelters, for example, consider a kitten with a minor cold or a dog older than five years old to be unadoptable.

Shelters with a highly restrictive, meaningless definition of "unadoptable" ignore the fact that some adopters want older animals who are less excitable and more sedate, to match their lifestyle. They ignore the fact that if shelters let people know how they can help, people respond. And they ignore the importance of people wanting to be heroic, to save the life of an animal who someone else failed to love. But the restrictive definition of what constitutes an "adoptable" animal is not simply a failure to overcome a personal bias. It also has an intentional and dark side: the label of "unadoptable" allows shelters to appear to be doing a better job than they are doing.

To the public, "unadoptable" implies a dog or cat who is hopelessly sick or injured, or in the case of dogs, who may be vicious and therefore pose a threat to public safety. That is what many of these shelters expect the public to believe: that they are, in fact, already meeting the dictionary definition of euthanasia ("the act or practice of killing hopelessly sick or injured individual animals in a relatively painless way for reasons of mercy") when they call a dog or cat "unadoptable." But that is not the criteria they are using to make those determinations. As a result, while shelters claim that they are saving "most adoptable animals," they are still killing as they have always done but only after unfairly labeling dogs "unadoptable."

In order to create fair and realistic definitions, the No Kill Advocacy Center has developed a "matrix" for agencies to use in order to characterize which animals are savable. Instead of giving shelters an excuse to kill, this model matrix is focused on pushing shelters to save more lives:

"No matrix can conceivably cover every condition or combination of conditions that might affect an individual animal. These definitions should be utilized based on a candid and realistic assessment of each animal's condition and not based on subjective and often self-serving notions of adoptability. In cases of doubt, the default shall always be a preference for lifesaving."

Indeed, even if a condition is not treatable, the emphasis remains, where possible, on lifesaving. The document states that *"an animal deemed non-savable may still be successfully cared for, transferred or adopted to an individual or organization capable of providing hospice care."*

While some organizations try to define animals away so they can appear to be doing a better job than they are, the Matrix says that:

"Conditions such as fleas, ear mites, or pregnancy do not change the animal's status from being healthy since they are resolved through professionally standard routine shelter care, such as flea preventative and spay or neuter surgery, and do not require out of the ordinary care. Healthy also includes animals who are exhibiting behaviors considered normal for the species such as house soiling, territorial marking, barking, chewing, digging or scratching behavior…"

“An animal does not have to be cute and cuddly or easy to place to meet this definition. Healthy is not the same as easy to adopt. The animal may be blind, deaf, old, or missing a limb, but as long as the animal is healthy, she meets the definition.”

By contrast, the definition of animals who are not savable is narrow, to avoid killing animals who can be saved. As a result, it utilizes the definition found in the No Kill Advocacy Center’s model legislation, the Companion Animal Protection Act:

"Non-Savable" shall include: (1) animals who are severely sick or injured and whose prognosis for rehabilitation is poor or grave and (2) vicious or dangerous dogs.”

“Non-savable animals include irremediably suffering animals. “Irremediably Suffering” shall include any animal with a medical condition who has a poor or grave prognosis for being able to live without severe, unremitting pain.”

In addition, the Matrix provides a list of common conditions as an example of who is savable.

Finally, unlike some other plans, the No Kill Advocacy Center requires healthy and treatable feral cats to be saved. The Matrix states:

Feral cats are savable or non-savable depending on their medical condition only. For purposes of providing accurate data, a shelter may subcategorize feral cats as “feral cats” and then further break them out into savable and non-savable depending on their medical condition. A feral cat with no known medical conditions, for example, is considered “feral cat/healthy.” A feral cat with a respiratory infection is considered “feral cat/treatable.” Both of these conditions are savable. In order to achieve No Kill, a shelter or community must “zero out” deaths in these categories as well, usually through Trap-Neuter-Release/Return programs.

Several notes of caution are in order. The Matrix’s main purpose is to force accountability on shelters and their leadership who claim they are saving “adoptable” animals. In other words, if a shelter is killing animals in the “savable” category, it cannot claim they are “unadoptable” or that the shelter is “No Kill.” The Matrix should not be one more layer of bureaucracy to be created before lifesaving begins.

Some agencies have indicated that “shelters must first determine exactly what animals are being euthanized and for what reasons. This information is essential in order for shelters to better direct their resources and efforts.”

This is unnecessary, a needless delay, and a financially wasteful process for three reasons. The first reason is that every shelter which has not achieved No Kill is killing animals because they are not comprehensively implementing the programs of services necessary to achieve No Kill which are identified in the No Kill Advocacy Center’s No Kill Equation. (Available at www.nokilladvocacycenter.org). The No Kill Equation is the only model which has allowed communities in the United States to achieve No Kill.

The second reason is that if a shelter embraces those programs, the issue will be addressed. The No Kill Equation provides for all categories of “at risk” animals, and resolves all of the reasons animals are being killed in shelters. There is simply no need for a study which will identify the cause of the problem as lack of the enclosed programs.

Third, a shelter will achieve No Kill and therefore “zero out” deaths in the savable category only when it saves approximately 91-95% of all animals it takes in. To put it bluntly: regardless of what claims shelters make, No Kill can only be achieved when at least 90% of all the animals impounded (regardless of reason) are saved. Anything short of that is mislabeling them as “unadoptable.”

Lifesaving Matrix for Shelter Dogs & Cats

In order to facilitate accurate data collection and assure consistent reporting on the condition of individual animals in the community, the following definitions have been developed:

Savable		Non-Savable	
Healthy	**Treatable**	**Irremediably Suffering**	**Vicious/Dangerous Dogs**

No matrix can conceivably cover every condition or combination of conditions that might affect an individual animal. These definitions should be utilized based on a candid and realistic assessment of each animal's condition and not based on subjective and often self-serving notions of adoptability. In cases of doubt, the default shall always be a preference for lifesaving. Additionally and importantly, an animal deemed non-savable may still be successfully cared for, transferred or adopted to an individual or organization capable of providing sanctuary or hospice care.

Savable: "Savable" shall include animals who are healthy or who have treatable medical conditions.

> Healthy: "Healthy" shall include any animal who is not sick or injured; or who is not a vicious dog.
>
> Conditions such as fleas, ear mites, or pregnancy do not change the animal's status from being healthy since they are resolved through professionally standard routine shelter care, such as flea preventative and spay or neuter surgery, and do not require out of the ordinary care. Healthy also includes animals who are exhibiting behaviors considered normal for the species such as house soiling, territorial marking, barking, chewing, digging or scratching behavior. Likewise feral and free roaming cats who are inhibited in social interactions with humans are not exhibiting abnormal behavior for the species. As long as a feral or free roaming cat is healthy, he meets the definition.
>
> An animal does not have to be cute and cuddly or easy to place to meet this definition. Healthy is not the same as easy to adopt. The animal may be blind, deaf, old, or missing a limb, but as long as the animal is healthy, she meets the definition.
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> Treatable: "Treatable" shall include any animal who is sick or injured, whose prognosis for rehabilitation of that illness and/or injury is excellent, good, fair, or guarded. An animal does not have to be "cured" to be treatable. For instance, a diabetic cat may never be cured but she is likely to live a normal life if given insulin shots.

Non-Savable: "Non-Savable" shall include: (1) animals who are severely sick or injured and whose prognosis for rehabilitation is poor or grave and (2) vicious or dangerous dogs.

Irremediably Suffering: Non-savable animals include irremediably suffering animals. "Irremediably Suffering" shall include any animal with a medical condition who has a poor or grave prognosis for being able to live without severe, unremitting pain.

Vicious Dog: "Vicious Dog" is a dog who has a propensity to or history of causing grievous bodily harm to people even when the dog is not hungry, in pain, or frightened, and whose prognosis for rehabilitation of that aggression is poor or grave.

Dangerous Dog: "Dangerous Dog" is a dog adjudicated to be vicious by a court of competent jurisdiction and where all appeals of that judicial determination have been unsuccessful.

Common Conditions: *Provided is a list of common conditions seen in shelter animals categorized appropriately.*

Savable – Healthy:
Age (senior/geriatric animals)
Behavior issues typical with dogs and cats such as house soiling issues, social shyness, barking, escaping
Blindness
Fleas
Ear mites
Missing limb
Pregnancy

Savable – Treatable:
Allergies, including dermatitis
Broken bones
Dental conditions
FeLV, FIV, asymptomatic
Heartworm positive
Hyperthyroid
Lacerations
Mange, demodectic or sarcoptic
Motherless neonates
Ocular conditions such as "cherry eye"
Otitis
Respiratory infection such as kennel cough or URI
Ringworm
Separation anxiety
Conditions resolved by surgery
Food guarding
Urinary tract infections
Stomatitis
Diabetes
Abscesses
Canine parvovirus and feline distemper (adult animals)

Non-savable:
Symptomatic Canine parvovirus and feline distemper (puppies and kittens)
Vicious dogs
Cancer with a poor prognosis
FeLV, symptomatic
Renal failure (end stage)

Feral cats are savable or non-savable depending on their medical condition only. For purposes of providing accurate data, a shelter may subcategorize feral cats as "feral cats" and then further break them out into savable and non-savable based on their medical condition. A feral cat with no known medical conditions, for example, is considered "feral cat/healthy." A feral cat with a respiratory infection is considered "feral cat/treatable." Both of these conditions are savable. In order to achieve No Kill, a shelter or community must "zero out" deaths in these categories as well, usually through Trap-Neuter-Release/Return programs.