Can We Save All the Lives at Risk in Shelters?

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Is it possible to achieve No Kill in our pounds and shelters? The United States example says that it is, and this experience may shed some valuable insights for the Australian context. In the last decade and a half, several shelters in numerous communities have comprehensively implemented a bold series of programs and services to reduce birthrates, increase placements, and keep animals with their responsible caretakers. As a result, they are achieving unprecedented results, saving upwards of 97 percent of all impounded animals in open admission animal control facilities. Some of these communities are in urban communities, and others are in rural communities. Some are in very politically liberal communities, and others are in very conservative ones. Some are in municipalities with high per capita incomes, and others are in communities known for high rates of poverty. These communities share very little demographically. What they do share is leadership at their shelters who have comprehensively implemented a key series of programs and services, collectively referred to as the "No Kill Equation" (identified in Appendix I.)

The fundamental lesson from the experiences of these communities is that the choices made by shelter managers are the most significant variables in whether animals live or die. Several communities are more than doubling adoptions and cutting killing by as much as 75 percent—and it isn't taking them five years or more to do it. They are doing it virtually overnight. In Reno, Nevada, local shelters led by the Nevada Humane Society in 2007 initiated an incredible lifesaving initiative that saw adoptions increase as much as 80 percent and deaths decline by 51 percent, despite taking in a combined 16,000 dogs and cats.

In addition to the speed with which it was attained, what also makes Reno's success so impressive is that the community takes in over two times the number of animals per capita than the U.S. national average and as much as five times the rate of neighboring communities and major U.S. cities. But in 2008, roughly 90 percent of all animals were saved, a rate that has increased to 93 percent for dogs and 90 percent for cats year-to-date in 2009, despite an economic and foreclosure crisis that has gripped the region. With an overall rate of lifesaving of roughly 90 percent of all animals, they are proving that communities can quickly save the vast majority of animals once they commit to do so, even in the face of public irresponsibility or economic crisis.

Unfortunately, many shelter directors remain steadfast in their refusal to embrace the No Kill paradigm. Among the various excuses why it cannot be done,[1] the two most common are that there are simply too many animals for the available homes ("pet overpopulation") and that shelters are not given adequate funding by local governments to get the job done without killing.

In the United States, however, careful review of the data, as well as the experiences of the most innovative, progressive, and best performing shelters nationwide prove that our movement needs to re-evaluate both the notion as to "who is to blame" as well as "what shelters can do about it." To put it bluntly, in the United States, shelters have the ability to save animals who are not irremediably suffering, hopelessly ill, or truly vicious dogs (which, combined, only apprise about four to seven percent of all impounds), and they can do so very quickly. And the two most often cited reasons—pet overpopulation and lack of resources—have not shown to be true barriers to success.

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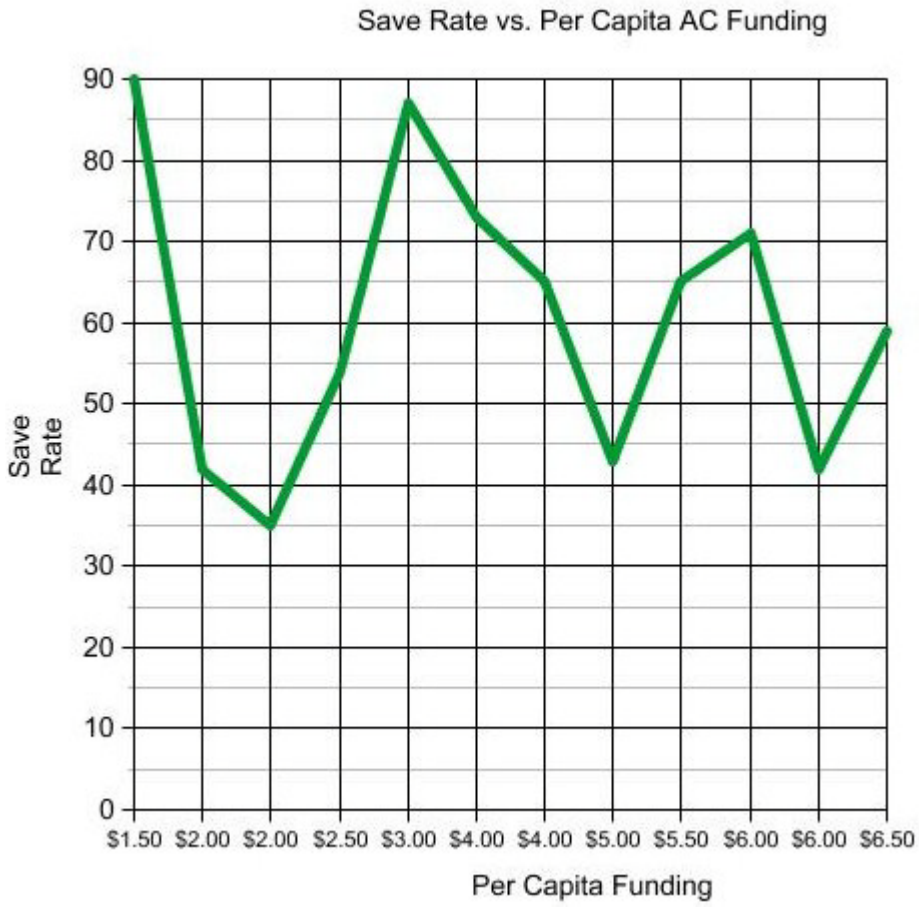
[1] In many ways, this argument is a non-starter. There are communities which have achieved No Kill. Saying that No Kill is not possible, therefore, flies in the face of its achievement in communities across the United States.

To begin with, many of the programs identified as key components of saving lives are more cost-effective than intaking, warehousing, and then killing animals. Some rely on private philanthropy, as in the use of rescue groups which shift costs of care from public taxpayers to private individuals and groups. Others, such as the use of volunteers, augment paid human resources. Still others, such as adoptions, bring in revenue. And, finally, some, such as neutering rather than killing feral cats, are simply less expensive, with exponential savings in terms of reducing births.

In addition, a 2009 multi-state study found no correlation between per capita funding for animal control and save rates. One shelter saved 90 percent of the animals. Another saved only 40 percent. One community has seen killing rates increase over 30 percent. Another has caused death rates to drop by 50 percent. There was, however, no correlation between success/failure and per capita spending on animal control. In other words, the difference between those shelters which succeeded and those which failed was not the size of the budget, but the programmatic effort of its leadership.

Roughly, per capita funding ranged from about $1.50 to about $6.30. Save rates ranged from 35 percent ($2.00 per capita) to 90 percent ($1.50 per capita), but they did not follow any predictable pattern. There were shelters with an 87 percent rate of lifesaving spending only $2.80 per capita, and shelters with a 42 percent rate (less than half of the former) spending more than double that (at $5.80 per capita):



In other words, the amount of per capita spending did not seem to make a difference. What did make a difference was leadership: the commitment of shelter managers to implementing a key series of necessary programs, as identified in Appendix I.

While communities should provide adequate funding, only throwing money at "the problem" will do very little without leadership committed both to lifesaving and to accountability. In King County, Washington, the County Council has spent millions of additional dollars in both capital and operational improvements since three independent evaluations in 2007 and 2008 revealed high rates of illness, deplorable conditions, and high rates of killing at King County Animal Care & Control (KCACC). In fact, until recently, the King County Council has never denied a funding request for KCACC. But no improvement in animal care has been achieved. Follow-up assessments continue to criticize the agency for the same conditions previously blamed on lack of resources.

In Portland, Oregon, likewise:

> Over the course of the past few years (fiscal years 2003 through 2008), a period during which the total number of animals brought into the shelter increased by only 5 percent and the agency's budget increased by 50 percent (to a current $4.6 million), nearly every measure of the agency's performance documents failure. Adoptions are down by 40 percent (dogs) and 18 percent (cats). Nearly half of the dogs not returned to owners are killed; so too are nearly two-thirds of cats. The "kill rate" is now well above rates in neighboring counties facing far more severe budget limitations. Thousands of dollars are squandered on adversarial enforcement efforts that have achieved no meaningful improvement in the public's safety.[2]

The second reason often cited for failure to embrace and/or achieve No Kill is the idea of pet overpopulation, but the data here has also not borne out the claim. It is important to note that the argument that there are enough homes for shelter animals does not also include any claims that some people aren't irresponsible with animals. It doesn't mean there aren't a lot of animals entering shelters. It doesn't mean it wouldn't be better if there were fewer of them being impounded. Nor does it mean that shelters don't have institutional obstacles to success. But it does mean that these problems are not insurmountable. And it does mean shelters can do something other than killing for the vast majority of animals.

In the United States, current estimates from a wide range of groups indicate that approximately four million dogs and cats are killed in shelters every year. Of these, given data on the incidence of aggression in dogs (based on dog bite extrapolation) and save rates at the best performing shelters in the country from diverse regions and demographics, better than 90 percent of all shelter animals are "savable." The remainder consists of hopelessly ill or injured animals and vicious dogs whose prognosis for rehabilitation is poor or grave. That would put the number of savable dogs and cats at roughly 3.6 million.

These same demographics also tell us that every year, roughly 21 million are looking to bring a new dog or cat into their home, of which 17 million have not decided where they will get that animal and can be influenced to adopt from a shelter. Even if the vast majority of those 17 million (upwards of 80 percent) got a dog or cat from somewhere other than a shelter, U.S. shelters could still zero out the deaths of savable animals. On top of that, not all animals entering shelters need adoption: Some will be lost strays who will be reclaimed by their family (shelters which are comprehensive in their lost pet reclaim efforts, for example, have demonstrated that as many as two-thirds of stray dogs can be reunited with their families). Others are unsocialized feral cats who need neuter and release. Some will be vicious dogs or are

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[2] That doesn't mean that governments should continue underfunding their shelters where they are doing so. Shelters with low per capita spending claimed difficulty sustaining programs. As a result, the study should not be used as an excuse to reduce shelter budgets.

irremediably suffering and will be killed. In the end, a shelter only needs to find new homes for less than half of all incoming animals.

From the perspective of achievability, therefore, the prognosis for widespread No Kill success is very good. But let's put all this aside. Let's assume "pet overpopulation" is real and insurmountable. To do that, we have to ignore the data. We also have to ignore the experiences of successful communities. In the United States, to accept the "No Kill is impossible" argument requires pretending the knowledge and the results do not exist. Is the data in Australia very different than that of the United States in terms of the calculus between the number of impounded shelter animals, and the number of available homes for those animals? If that were true, there would be few commercial sources for animals, such as pet stores because they would not be in business since there would be no profit in the sale of dogs and cats since homes are not available in sufficient number. But let us assume that is true.

How does this change our support for the No Kill philosophy and the programs and services that make it possible? Even if this were true, it doesn't change the calculus. In the United States, shelters nationally are killing roughly half or more of all incoming animals. To borrow an overused sports analogy: that puts the save rate at the 50-yard line. And although the evidence is overwhelming to the contrary, let's say that shelters can never cross the goal line because of "pet overpopulation." What is wrong with moving the ball forward? If all shelters put in place the programs and services which brought rates of shelter killing to all-time lows in communities throughout the United States, they can save millions of additional lives nationally, regardless of whether they ever achieve an entirely No Kill community. That is worth doing and worth doing without delay. Because every year they delay, indeed every day they delay, the body count increases. It is indefensible for shelter directors to refuse to implement programs that would dramatically lower death rates at their shelter because they lack the belief that those programs can eliminate killing entirely.

Appendix I: The No Kill Equation

Two decades ago, the concept of a No Kill community was little more than a dream. Today, it is a reality in many cities and counties nationwide and the numbers continue to grow. And the first step is a decision, a commitment to reject kill-oriented ways of doing business. No Kill starts as an act of will. The next step involves putting in place the infrastructure to save lives.

Following a commitment to No Kill is the need for accountability. Accountability means having clear definitions, a lifesaving plan, and protocols and procedure oriented toward preserving life. But accountability also allows, indeed requires, flexibility. Too many shelters lose sight of this principle, staying rigid with shelter protocols, believing these are engraved in stone. They are not. Protocols are important because they ensure accountability from staff. But protocols without flexibility can have the opposite effect: stifling innovation, causing lives to be needlessly lost, and allowing shelter employees who fail to save lives to hide behind a paper trail.

The decision to end an animal's life is an extremely serious one, and should always be treated as such. No matter how many animals a shelter kills, each and every animal is an individual, and each deserves individual consideration.

And finally, to meet the challenge that No Kill entails, shelter leadership needs to get the community excited, to energize people for the task at hand. By working with people, implementing lifesaving programs, and treating each life as precious, a shelter can transform a community.

The mandatory programs and services include:

I. Feral Cat TNR Program
Many communities throughout the United States are embracing Trap, Neuter, Release programs (TNR) to improve animal welfare, reduce death rates, and meet obligations to public welfare.

II. High-Volume, Low-Cost Spay/Neuter
Low cost, high volume spay/neuter will quickly lead to fewer animals entering the shelter system, allowing more resources to be allocated toward saving lives.

III. Rescue Groups
An adoption or transfer to a rescue group frees up scarce cage and kennel space, reduces expenses for feeding, cleaning, killing, and improves a community's rate of lifesaving. In an environment of millions of dogs and cats killed in shelters annually, rare is the circumstance in which a rescue group should be denied an animal.

IV. Foster Care
Volunteer foster care is crucial to No Kill. Without it, saving lives is compromised. It is a low cost, and often no cost, way of increasing a shelter's capacity, improving public relations, increasing a shelter's public image, rehabilitating sick and injured or behaviorally challenged animals, and saving lives.

V. Comprehensive Adoption Programs
Adoptions are vital to an agency's lifesaving mission. The quantity and quality of shelter adoptions is in shelter management's hands, making lifesaving a direct function of shelter policies and practice. In fact, studies show people get their animals from shelters only 20 percent of the time. If shelters better promoted their animals and had adoption programs responsive to the needs of the community, including public access hours for working people, offsite adoptions, adoption incentives, and effective marketing, they could increase the number of homes available and replace killing with adoptions. Contrary to conventional wisdom, shelters can adopt their way out of killing.

VI. Pet Retention
While some of the reasons animals are surrendered to shelters are unavoidable, others can be prevented—but only if shelters are willing to work with people to help them solve their problems. Saving animals requires communities to develop innovative strategies for keeping people and their companion animals together. And the more a community sees its shelters as a place to turn for advice and assistance, the easier this job will be.

VII. Medical and Behavior Programs
In order to meet its commitment to a lifesaving guarantee for all savable animals, shelters need to keep animals happy and healthy and keep animals moving through the system. To do this, shelters must put in place comprehensive vaccination, handling, cleaning, socialization, and care policies before animals get sick and rehabilitative efforts for those who come in sick, injured, unweaned, or traumatized.

VIII. Public Relations/Community Involvement
Increasing adoptions, maximizing donations, recruiting volunteers and partnering with community agencies comes down to one thing: increasing the shelter's exposure. And that means consistent marketing and public relations. Public relations and marketing are the foundation of all a shelter's activities and their success. To do all these things well, the shelter must be in the public eye.

IX. Volunteers
Volunteers are a dedicated "army of compassion" and the backbone of a successful No Kill effort. There is never enough staff, never enough dollars to hire more staff, and always more needs than paid human resources. That is where volunteers come in and make the difference between success and failure and, for the animals, life and death.

X. Proactive Redemptions
One of the most overlooked areas for reducing killing in animal control shelters are lost animal reclaims. Sadly, besides having pet owners fill out a lost pet report, very little effort is made in this area of shelter operations. This is unfortunate because doing so—primarily shifting from passive to a more proactive approach—has proven to have a significant impact on lifesaving and allow shelters to return a large percentage of lost animals to their families.

XI. A Compassionate Director
The final element of the No Kill equation is the most important of all, without which all other elements are thwarted—a hard working, compassionate animal control or shelter director not content to regurgitate tired clichés or hide behind the myth of "too many animals, not enough homes." Unfortunately, this one is also oftentimes the hardest one to demand and find.

But it is clear that No Kill is simply not achievable without rigorous implementation of each and every one of these programs and services. These programs provide the *only* model which has ever created No Kill communities. It is up to us in the humane movement to demand them of our local shelters, and no longer to settle for illusory excuses and smokescreens shelters often put up in order to avoid implementing them.

Comprehensive Implementation

To succeed fully, however, shelters should not implement the programs piecemeal or in a limited manner. If they are sincere in their desire to stop the killing, animal shelters will implement and expand programs to the point that they replace killing entirely. Combining rigorous, comprehensive implementation of the No Kill Equation with best practices and accountability of staff in cleaning, handling, and care of animals, must be the standard.

In 2004, for example, the Pennsylvania SPCA conducted fewer than 200 free spay/neuter surgeries for the pets of the community's low-income population. Shelter leaders can boast of a low-cost and free spay/neuter program, but 200 surgeries in a city of nearly 1.5 million people, with one in four of them below the federal poverty line, will not impact the numbers of animals entering Philadelphia shelters. By

contrast, the San Francisco SPCA, in a city with roughly half the population of Philadelphia, performed approximately 9,000 surgeries a year throughout the late 1990s, roughly 84 percent of them were free.

Similarly, animal control in Austin, Texas allows only employees to participate in its foster care program. The shelter can say it is implementing the programs and services of the No Kill Equation, but it is excluding thousands of animal lovers from participating in the lifesaving effort, seriously limiting how many lives they save.

A shelter committed to No Kill does not send neonatal orphaned kittens into foster care "sometimes," but rather every time. A shelter committed to No Kill does not merely allow rescue groups access to animals "some of the time," but every time a legitimate rescue group is willing to take over care and custody of the animal. Indeed, a No Kill shelter actively seeks these groups out and contacts a particular rescue organization whenever an animal meets its criteria.

Shelters must also put forth more effort to reunite lost animals with their families. Traditional shelters do little more than have people fill out lost pet reports. As a result, in a typical shelter, less than two percent of cats and roughly 20 percent of dogs are reclaimed by their families. This is unfortunate because being more proactive and comprehensive would have a significant impact on lifesaving.

Those rare communities who have systematized their approach and become more proactive have more than doubled this rate of redemption. Washoe County Animal Services in Reno, Nevada, for example, returned seven percent of lost cats and 60 percent of lost dogs to their homes in 2007. Given the high per capita intake of animals (which some suggest would evidence high rates of "public irresponsibility") one would expect the agency to have a very low redemption rate. Instead, it is very near the top in the nation. Why? The shelter is proactive in finding the people who have lost the pets.

Before impounding stray dogs, Washoe County animal control officers check for identification, scan for microchips, knock on doors in the neighborhood where the animal was found, and talk to area residents. They also carry mobile telephones so that they can immediately call the missing animal's family and facilitate a quick reunion. While this may seem an obvious course of action, it is, unfortunately, uncommon in American shelters–often with tragic outcomes. The more traditional approach is simply to impound any animals found wandering the streets and to transport them immediately to the pound. Once there they can get lost in the system, compete for kennel space with other animals, and are often put to death.

In Washoe County, impound is a last resort. But if animals are impounded, shelter staff is equally as proactive as field officers are in facilitating redemptions. They immediately post to the Web photographs, identifying information, and the location of where the animal was found. People can search for the animals from their computers at home or at work.

These efforts in Washoe County, combined with an over 50 percent increase in the adoption rate in the community thanks to the Nevada Humane Society, has resulted in a 93 percent communitywide rate of shelter lifesaving for dogs and 90 percent for cats year-to-date in 2009. The difference between the average community and Washoe County is striking, but even more so because this latter community is

still only scratching the surface of what can be accomplished in terms of redemption rates. Some communities in the United States have achieved a nearly 65 percent reclaim rate for stray dogs; even higher rates have been achieved in other countries. The reclaim rate for cats can—and should—match these, rather than remain at deplorably low national averages.

This not only shows how the achievement of a No Kill community is well within our reach, it demonstrates how modernization of shelter practices by bringing them in line with the No Kill Equation can yield dramatic declines in killing virtually overnight.

In short, shelters must take killing off the table for savable animals, and utilize the programs and services of the No Kill Equation not sometimes, not merely when it is convenient or politically expedient to do so, but for every single animal, every single time. A half-hearted effort isn't enough. It is primarily the shift from a reactive to proactive orientation and from a casual, ad-hoc, limited implementation to a comprehensive one, which will lead to the greatest declines in killing, and fix our broken animal shelter system.

References

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