Diary of a No-Kill Shelter Director

A former California district attorney, Nathan Winograd, joined the San Francisco SPCA in 1995 as their Director of Ethical Studies. Working with Richard Avanzino on and off for several years, and with a special passion for feral cats, Winograd developed innovative programs that helped the city on the bay become the first major U.S. community to end the killing of adoptable pets.

Last year, Winograd packed up a suitcase filled with ideas and shepherded his wife, kids, and two dogs across the country to Ithaca, New York, where he became executive director of the Tompkins County SPCA.

Photo: Mamta Popat

▶ By Nathan Winograd

As I approached the house that was home to Tompkins County's SPCA, I was planning for my first two weeks to be a learning time. I wanted to get to know the staff and see their routine: everything from how they cleaned the kennels and fed the animals to how they tested aggressive dogs, investigated cruelty complaints, and handled animals that were sick. I wanted to know how every little thing ran.

I had my own philosophy and approach of how an animal shelter could work best. But I wanted to give the staff an opportunity to share their own views without being worried that their views would conflict with mine.

The first day went pretty well. I at least got a sense of where everything was. Day Two, my staff informed me that our dog kennels were full and that since a litter of six puppies just came in, I needed to decide who was going to be killed in order to make space. I asked for Plan B. There was none. I asked for suggestions. None of those either. So much for my plan to be the silent observer. It was time for a staff meeting.

I introduced myself formally, told them about my background and experience, and shared my view of what constituted a successful shelter. Success, I said, is defined by how many animals

go home alive, period. Of course, we want to make sure they are going into responsible, loving homes – anything less would mean that they would come right back, taking us further away from, not closer to, our goals. But finding homes, I emphasized, was the bottom line. And everyone would be measured by results. The rest would fall into place: community support, new resources, and the programs that follow. To get the results, we needed the desire to succeed, the creativity to come up with solutions, and the flexibility to implement them.

I got nowhere. "We don't have anywhere to put them." "We don't have any foster parents who would take dogs or puppies." "This is how we have always done it."

Day Two and my experiment with trying to build consensus came to an end. It was time to lay out my own policy.

"Volunteers who work with animals do so out of sheer love," I said. "They don't bring home a paycheck. So if a volunteer says 'I can't do it,' I can accept that from them. But staff members are

paid to save lives. If a paid member of staff throws up their hands and says, "There's nothing that can be done," I may as well eliminate their position and use the money that goes for their salary in a more constructive manner…like hiring temporary boarding space at a kennel. So…what are we going to do with the puppies that doesn't involve killing any animals?"

And a solution was found: horse troughs for puppies in the lobby next to the front desk. What better way to showcase those little gems, while simultaneously giving them much needed socialization that would lead to happy permanent placements?

The next weekend, 70 kittens were relinquished to the shelter, above and beyond the regular number of incoming dogs, cats, and other assorted animals (including 16 mice left out by our dumpster). As the humane officers informed me that they had just raided a residence and were bringing in 30 sick cats, I overheard one staff member say to another, "Maybe now he will euthanize some animals." Back to square one. I explained that killing for space was no longer an option. Again, appropriate alternatives were found.

Not all staff was supportive of the new order. Over the next five months, seven of the twelve full-time employees on staff moved on, eventually replaced with new coworkers who shared a vision of a no-kill Tompkins County. In the meantime, not a single animal was killed for lack of space.

The TC SPCA was set up like hundreds of humane societies throughout the country. It maintains an animal control contract with the city of Ithaca as well as all ten townships in the county. That means they are required to take in all stray and abandoned

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animals. The semirural/urban county has a population of 100,000 people. The TC SPCA has an annual budget of $616,000 and takes in approximately 3,000 animals per year.

So how does a traditional shelter make a community no-kill? In Tompkins County, we did it with a simple yet highly effective three-step process: (1) Stop the killing; (2) Stop the killing; (3) Stop the killing. I am not joking. No-kill starts as an act of will.

Like so many shelters with animal control contracts, the TC SPCA had relied on the fiction that the only solution to pet overpopulation is the "blue [euthanizing] solution." Staff would shake their heads and continue to blame "irresponsible owners" for the fact that so many animals would go out the door in barrels rather than in the loving arms of families. Like so many other shelters, the TC SPCA never once saw the killing as its own failure to find solutions, meet its real mandate to be an animal welfare organization, or live up to the very real but often ignored shelter credo that "every life is precious." But now, a new Board of Directors had decided to make a change.

Over the next six months, I developed a flurry of programs to increase the number of homes, reduce birthrates, rehabilitate injured animals, and keep animals with their loving, responsible caretakers.

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I went down the list of what I thought we would need. I went to the local universities and asked, "What can you provide? Do you have PhDs who can look at my wacky dogs and tell me how to bring them back to normal behavior?"

We went to the media and said, "Can you showcase our available pets once a week on the local news?" Now, we're on the local TV news once a week, we're on the local radio station once a week, and we're in the local newspaper once a week. So at least three times a week, we're out there.

I contacted every church, every community group, and said, "Anytime you have an event, I'd like to be there and bring some pets who need homes." I didn't get any no's. Everybody said, "That sounds great!"

> "Understanding that the only rule that can't be broken is the no-kill rule, the bottom line is this: Evaluate and treat each animal as an individual and stay flexible.
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> "Too many shelters lose sight of individual animals, staying rigid with their shelter protocols, believing that 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.
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> "Come what may, you are only successful if the animals go home alive. The number of children reached through humane education is nice, the number of volunteer hours amassed is nice, the size of the endowment is nice. None of it amounts to much if the save rate (the percentage of animals going home alive) is not steadily increasing every year. Everyone gets a home."

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Once we got the ball rolling, the calls started coming in. "I'm opening up a new store. Can you bring some kittens for adoption?"

When I started, the staff didn't really want volunteers around. The then-shelter manager informed me that "volunteers are more trouble than they are worth." Once we adopted our new route, we went very quickly from a handful of volunteers to about 140. During the summer, we were, unfortunately, even turning volunteers away. We had our dogs going out for so many walks that they were not in the kennels long enough to be viewed by the public for adoption! I had to limit them to three walks a day. I had to have the dogs in the kennels long enough so that when an adopter came to look at them, I didn't have all these empty cages.

I spent my first two months apologizing for the past actions of the organization and for how poorly people were treated. People want to save lives. What they don't want to do is help you kill animals. So it was nice to be asking volunteers to let the dogs just sit in the kennels for a little.

And so we went from excuses to answers, from blaming to solving. And during our peak summer season, the death rate in Tompkins County plummeted by 78%. We didn't just save cute and cuddly animals, either. We found loving homes for old pets, blind pets, and pets missing limbs. The number of animals sterilized prior to adoption went from 10% to 100%. We went from a handful of foster homes to 196 during our busy summer months. While all of the healthy, friendly pets were saved, overall almost 9 out of 10 dogs and cats impounded by the SPCA were either reclaimed by their owners or found new homes, one of the best "save rates" of any county in the United States. And the level of community giving skyrocketed.

Next year, Tompkins County SPCA will be 100 years old. And next year, we'll be the first traditional shelter that serves as an animal control agency and assumes the responsibility for every stray animal, where no feral cat or sick or injured treatable animal is euthanized. That has been the case since my first day at work, June 11, 2001. And that includes goats, chickens, bunnies, guinea pigs, and other assorted critters, too.

We did it not with a big shelter, not with buckets of cash, but with a simple, firm commitment to stop the killing and the flexibility to see it through. It started with six puppies in a horse trough. Today, it involves hundreds of animals in foster care, hundreds more traveling to off-site adoptions, a coalition of breed-specific rescue groups, local veterinary participation, and a community that has faith in its shelter and wants to support our lifesaving results. Is each life precious as every shelter tells us? Only if we believe that at the end of the day, every death of a healthy, treatable sick or injured animal or feral cat is a profound failure. And only if the shelter director acknowledges that the responsibility for the death is his or hers alone. ❧

Nathan's Top 10 Keys to Stopping the Killing

(These can all be done very cost-effectively!)

Know Thyself. How many animals coming into the shelter are neonatal kittens and puppies? How many are dogs with behavioral problems? How many are sick or injured? How are they coming to the shelter – are they surrendered by owners? Strays? Different problems need different solutions.

Lend a Hand. When I arrived in Tompkins County, the then-shelter manager told me that "volunteers are more trouble than they are worth." Not so. We increased our volunteer core to 140 from about 12 by asking people for their help and telling them what their help would accomplish. Volunteers put in 10,300 hours last year fostering, socializing, grooming, and caring for shelter pets.

In Foster Parents We Trust. If I trust them to bottle-feed baby kittens for four weeks around the clock, I am going to trust them to place the kittens with loving, responsible caretakers – after we spay/neuter them.

There Goes the Neighborhood. We attend every neighborhood fair, grand opening, church bazaar, and community event. We set up shop at corner malls and stores. Over 10 percent of all our adoptions occur off-site, and the number is steadily increasing.

Public Access. We are open seven days a week until 5:30 P.M., giving working people an opportunity to reclaim lost pets or find new ones. This doesn't necessarily mean longer hours, just different ones!

Do As I Do. Thanks to partnerships with local vets, no animal goes home unaltered. We get vastly discounted fees on care for our sick and injured animals, and we helped develop community programs that provide low-cost spay/neuter to those in need. Last year, 568 pets of low-income Tompkins County residents were altered.

Hear Ye, Hear Ye…Get those press releases out. Got a great heartwarming news story? Having an adoption day? Get the word out on events and stories every single day! Staying in the public eye raises awareness, increases the number of homes, and brings in the bucks.

Get By With a Little Help From Your Friends. Ask, ask, and ask for help – for money, for volunteers, for homes, for rescue groups, for foster parents. Speak at community groups and always end by asking them to support your lifesaving work by opening their hearts, homes, and wallets to the needy animals who make their way to your shelter.

Ignore Conventional Wisdom. Advice that comes from the old-guard organizations that fancy themselves the teachers of local shelters is often mired in the past and not terribly effective. Local shelters and rescue groups know their community better than anyone else. Look around, stay flexible, think creatively, and act boldly – even if it is not on the "approved" list of big-shelter practices.

Where There's a Will, There's a Way: No-kill begins and ends as an act of will. Do not ever accept that killing is a legitimate and appropriate "solution" to homeless pets. Stay focused, work hard, make sure there is a direct lifesaving effect with the programs you implement, and get rid of the ones with no immediate measurable impact – and you'll get results.