



The Humane Society of Greater Miami: Transitioning From a Traditional To No-Kill Shelter

By Gaylene Lee

At the Humane Society of Greater Miami (HSGM), making the decision to go from a traditional to a no-kill shelter was actually the most difficult part of the process for us. Once the Board of Directors, management, and staff agreed to move forward, it was simply a matter of planning the transition.

Planning was the key to our smooth transition. The intent of this article is to share a bit of HSGM's experience with others who are considering the same path with the hope that some of the things we learned will be helpful. This article will focus on two components of the transition: (1) the decision-making process; and (2) how we conducted the transition stage and what we felt was important in that stage. The conclusion will discuss the results of the transition and HSGM's future as a no-kill shelter.

The Decision-Making Process

Our situation is interesting because change was brought about by those already in the organization and not by a new person coming in from the outside. This change of direction was made possible by the resignation of the Executive Director.

In 1999, a few key members of the administrative staff began exploring new and more effective means for confronting the animal overpopulation problem. The no-kill philosophy made sense to several people within the organization, who made their case to the entire Board.

The major obstacle in our path was the fact that we were an organization that had a history of actively participating in no-kill bashing. It was a part of our rhetoric, and Board members were constantly given information as to why we were so much better than the no-kill groups and why no-kill was actually "you-kill" and an irresponsible approach to animal sheltering.

We approached this concern by discussing the changes that were taking place in animal welfare and the changing societal attitudes towards companion animals, and how these changes were effecting the expectations of what a Humane Society should be.

We began gathering information and distributing it to the Board prior to meetings, thus giving them an opportunity to digest as much as possible and come to the table with questions and concerns. The Maddie's Fund website article "**Ten Reasons to Consider No-Kill**" was instrumental in the first phase of discussions.

There were three important and useful ways we approached the change that helped us down the road. First, we never approached the decision as one of being "right" or "wrong." We framed it as a matter of choice and preferred methodology. This enabled us to maintain an understanding and support of traditional shelters and their choices. More importantly, by taking the right and wrong out of it, Board members would not be left with a feeling that we had somehow done something wrong in the past for which we should now feel guilty.

We also spoke about our decision in terms of "responsible animal stewardship." This follows the argument that no-kill is more compatible with what we are asking the community to do in regard to human responsibility towards animals. We referred to this as "walking the talk." This idea of responsible pet stewardship was instrumental in ensuring that management practices implemented were, and are in fact, responsible ones reflecting excellent animal care in terms of medical treatment, behavioral assessment and modification, sheltering and adoption programs.

Lastly, while for some members the transition to no-kill was understandably looked at as a means of obtaining additional funding, we constantly proposed the transition as separate from funding considerations. We stressed that the Board should only approve this transition if they felt it was the most appropriate and humane way for our organization to begin to work towards ending the euthanasia of healthy, adoptable pets in the community of Miami-Dade County.

Many in our community were formulating or had already formulated thoughts and ideas about animal welfare and euthanasia that closely resembled our own.

No-kill was being talked about by the new Director at Animal Services and meetings were being held by the Dade County Veterinary Foundation to discuss forming a community group. These groups were supportive of HSGM's decision to become no-kill and we were encouraged greatly by that support. Both the Director of Animal Services and the President of the Dade County Veterinary Foundation (also a member of the HSGM Board) vocally endorsed the goal to end euthanasia of healthy adoptable pets in our community and continue to support HSGM in that effort.

Yet another critical factor contributing to our decision to go no-kill was the co-operative relationships we were building with rescue groups in our community. By establishing respectful communication between ourselves and the leadership of these groups, we were able to discuss our decision within a positive, supportive framework. Because of supportive relationships with Animal Services, the veterinary community and rescue groups, our transition received no negative publicity and was seen as a collaborative

beginning to seek ways to end euthanasia of all healthy, adoptable pets not only in our shelter but in the entire Miami-Dade County.

In February 2002, the Board held a retreat to come to a decision about no-kill. They voted to officially make the transition on March 1st, 2002. Since some of our members were uncomfortable with the term, “no-kill,” we advertise that we are a “limited admission shelter” with a mission to end the euthanasia of healthy animals.

In summary, there are several factors which were helpful to HSGM in transitioning:

- We did not frame the decision in terms of right and wrong as applied to all organizations. It was framed as a more effective, representative choice of who we are and where we see our mission going in respect to Society’s changing morality towards animals and expectations of Humane Societies.
- We focused on “responsible pet stewardship.” This guided our policy and procedure changes to ensure that our limited intake policy would be responsible and one which would continue to help as many healthy, adoptable pets as possible. It also guided our animal sheltering procedures, became the founding basis of our in-house socialization program and influenced our shelter medical protocols.
- We tried to prevent the transitioning decision from being influenced by an expectation of funding.
- Critical support from the veterinary community through the President of the Dade County Veterinary Foundation.
- Support and encouragement from the Director of the Miami-Dade Police Department Animal Services.
- A history of creating co-operative relationships with community rescue groups and other established no-kill groups.

The Transition Plan

Once the decision had been approved by the Board, we changed our mission statement, started to change admission policies and established a plan to inform the public at large. Two of the most important aspects of this process were: (1) creating policies and procedures and (2) staff training.

We created our limited admission policies using information from other shelters about their experiences. In essence, we learned from the mistakes of others and from critiques of the no-kill movement. Resources included HSUS articles, articles critical of no-kill in *Readers Digest* and other sources, and the Maddie’s Fund Website.

As mentioned before, our focus on being excellent animal stewards guided our policy making. We would not become hoarders or utilize precious resources on non-rehabilitatable pets. We would focus on saving the healthy, adoptable pets first. We would not overcrowd our shelter, creating health hazards and psychological harm to the pets we do admit. We did decide to medically treat pets who, subsequent to admittance, came down with minor infections or skin disorders. We also created an in-house

socialization program which allows us to watch our canines romp and play outside on a regular basis. This has become a favorite program of everyone.

Weeks before the change, every staff member was trained to conduct intake counseling sessions. During these sessions, those surrendering pets are given information about reasonable alternatives to surrender based upon their situation. If we can't take the pet, we refer them to breed rescue groups or place them on a waiting list. We inform clients about the existing pet overpopulation problem in Miami and the importance of having all their pets spayed or neutered. We encourage them to vaccinate pets at least ten days before bringing them to us and have been pleasantly surprised by people's compliance. We also ask those surrendering very young puppies or kittens to have them vaccinated and wormed at six weeks of age, keep them for another two weeks, then bring them back for adoption. This has been highly successful.

Staff was also trained to conduct health and behavior exams for each pet brought to us. On average, a person surrendering a pet will spend twenty minutes with a counselor while the pet is being assessed for intake. While we had expected the public to react to this process negatively, we have had very few problems. We've found that most people understand our determination to not kill another healthy, adoptable pet in order to make room for another. And we have found that many, many people surrendering pets support us on that. We believe it is what they expect from a Humane Society.

Preliminary Evaluation and Assessment of the Transition

HSGM is in its eighth month as a no-kill shelter. There is a definite improvement in staff morale and humane management of pets admitted. Also, our language, our mission statement and policies are much more in line with the practice of promoting excellent animal stewardship and therefore logically more comprehensible to the staff and the public. This consistency between rhetoric and action is one which enhances credibility and is continually assisting us in improving the public's image of HSGM.

In 1999, 78% of the pets admitted into our shelter were euthanized, more than half of which were killed as healthy, adoptables. Today, 100% of healthy, adoptable pets are adopted or sent to rescue groups. In 1999, we adopted out 1,300 pets. So far in 2002, we have adopted out over 2,000 pets (and expect at least 500 more adoptions by the end of the year). We are continuing to work on finding more outlets to adopt even more companion animals into the community.

Yet another benefit of our becoming no-kill is that board members, staff and volunteers are spending less of their valuable time defending, justifying and rationalizing the use of killing as a tool to manage the pet overpopulation problem. We can now focus our efforts on exploring new ways to work with the public and other members of the animal welfare community to end the killing of healthy adoptable pets within our county. We are promoting the idea of responsible pet stewardship while being responsible stewards.

Looking Towards the Future

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At HSGM we are looking forward to the building of a new shelter. This new shelter will enable us to care for approximately 200 more companion animals and provide much needed adoption services to yet another section of our county. Dade County is approximately 2000 square miles and has only two large shelters operating: HSGM and Animal Services, both within fifteen miles of one another. We feel confident that the new shelter will make it possible for us to double our adoptions within its first year of opening. Our emphasis on responsible animal stewardship will be exemplified in this new environment using the lifestyle room concept and our newly added Behavior/Socialization staff.

The new shelter will also allow us to take more pets from Animal Services, thus saving more pets throughout our community. In the future, we'll be working with Animal Services to formalize an adoption agreement and develop ideas about how we can safely and effectively transport pets from one shelter to another. We are considering having intake personnel at the Government Shelter and doing on-site assessments prior to transporting to our receiving facility.

All in all, our transition has resulted in more focused and creative methods to assist us in moving our entire community towards the no-kill goal: the end of the killing of all healthy and treatable companion pets.

About the author: Gaylene Lee currently serves as Deputy Director for Humane Care at the Humane Society of Greater Miami. Over the years Gaylene has worked hard to engage Miami's animal welfare organizations in constructive dialog and collaboration, putting to use her Master of Science degree in Alternative Dispute Resolution.