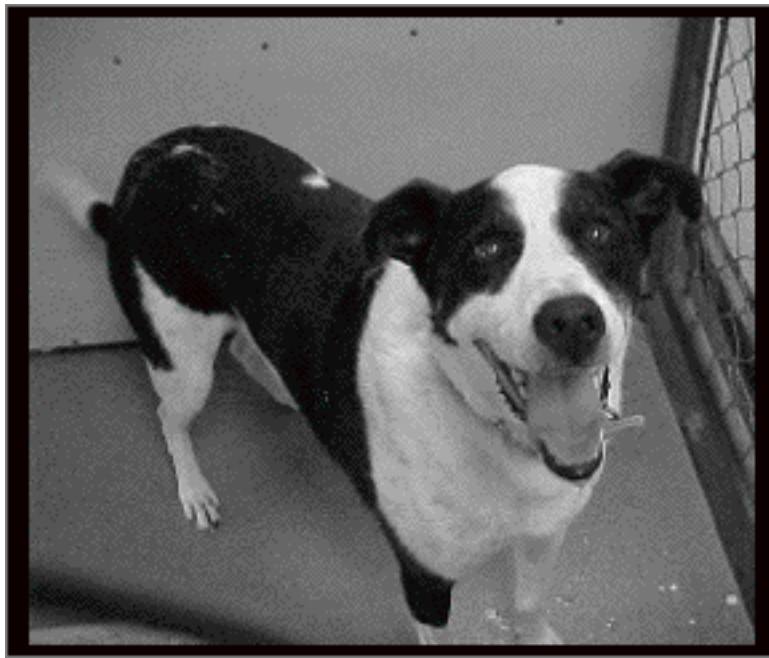# Big Dogs, Shy Cats:
# How to Find Homes for
"Hard to Place" Pets

TOMPKINS COUNTY
SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS

Big Dogs, Shy Cats: Placing Them in Droves

You have an adoption program. You have a spay/neuter program. Your community is saving more and more of the pets who come to the shelters. Now what about the big, black, clumsy dog who has been living on the end of a chain for a year? What about the lovely kitty who takes a swipe at anyone who pets him for more than 60 seconds? The twelve-year-old pooch with a permanent limp and goofy eye? The blind kitten? How do you find them homes?

Finding homes for so-called "hard to place" pets is about taking responsibility, allocating resources wisely, doing some great marketing, and demanding—and getting—results. Here is a guideline for getting the job done.
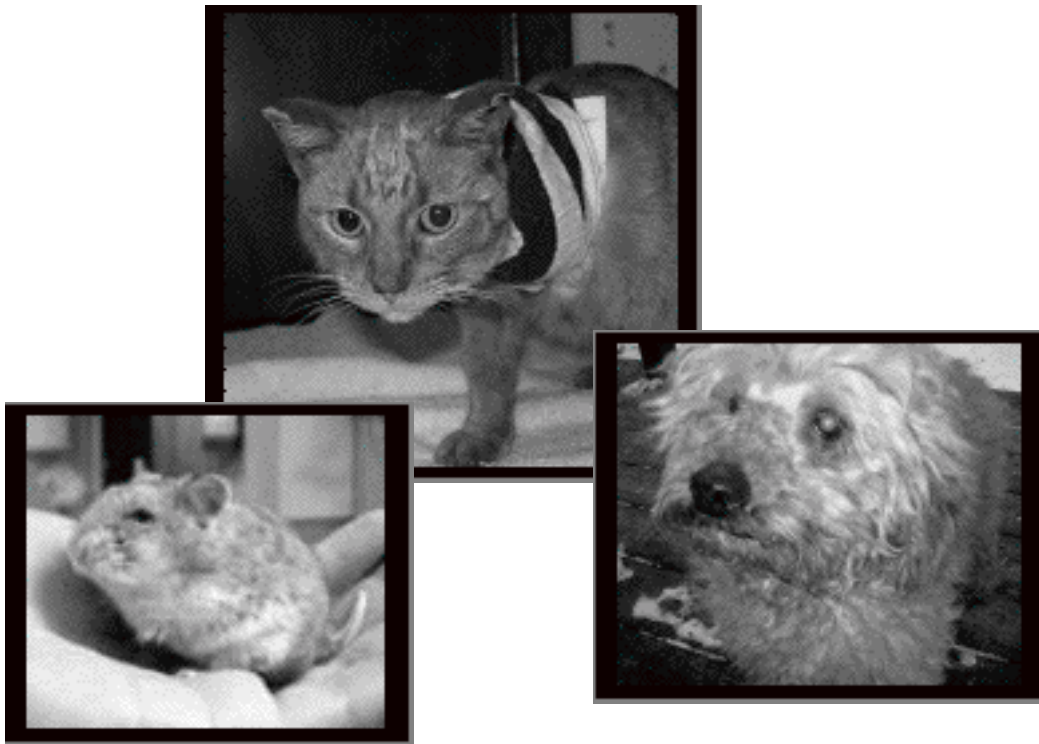
Step 1: Accept Responsibility

Complaining about how hard it is to place certain animals or bemoaning the lack of loving homes in the community won't save the lives of shelter pets. It is up to each shelter, rescue group, and humane society to take responsibility for the job of finding homes not just for the "cute and cuddlies" but the old, shy, hyper, and disfigured pets who come our way.

Unfortunately, too many shelters create their own stumbling blocks by continuing to rely on outdated clichés and beliefs that do nothing but make excuses for not saving lives:

■ ■ ■

Myth: "There are too many animals, not enough homes."

Reality: This is the old standby of the humane movement—an excuse developed to explain why the movement itself was killing so many pets. The truth of the matter is, there are homes out there, and it is up to us to appropriately promote our pets so they find their way into those homes. If there are really "too many animals and not enough homes," why are breeders and pet stores still in business?

Myth: "For every three animals we get in, we adopt one. You do the math."

Reality: Type this little gem into Google and you'll get 41 hits. That's 41 shelter directors making excuses for their own failures to get the job done. The fact of the matter is, shelters that save only 1/3 of the animals coming in are the exception today rather than the rule. And promoting this type of negative, depressing view of the shelter is more likely to keep people from coming to you for a pet than it is to guilt them into supporting you.

Myth: "If you increase the QUANTITY of homes, you have to reduce the QUALITY of your adoptions."

Reality: Shelters with high adoption rates have no higher return rates than shelters with poor adoption rates. Increasing the number of adoptions does not mean abandoning adoption standards.

Justine needed action, not excuses.

Myth: "You just can't find homes for older/ugly/special needs/behavior problem pets."

Reality: In many cases, these animals are actually easier to place than so-called perfect pets! Many adopters like to feel that they are helping a special animal. Finding homes for "hard to place" animals requires attention, resources, and marketing, but it certainly can—and is— being done all over the country.

■ ■ ■

Taking responsibility means abandoning negative thinking and changing gears—placing big cats and shy dogs requires creative thinking and hard work—something every single shelter staff member should already be good at.

Step 2: Adopt Accountability

Accountability requires a critical review of operations, programs, and staffing to ensure that they are generating lifesaving results. It also means appropriately allocating resources.

Eliminate unnecessary programs

Just because you have always offered a certain program or just because it is a long-time favorite of the humane movement does not mean you must continue it. If your organization's goal is to save companion animals, your programs and services should be geared to get concrete results in those areas.

Eliminate unnecessary overhead and staffing

Review operations to determine which positions are key, whether any job duties are unnecessary or redundant, and streamline operations.

At the Tompkins County SPCA, we had:
- An Executive Director
- A Director of Operations
- A Shelter Manager
- A Development Director
- A Spay/Neuter Coordinator
- A Volunteer Coordinator
- A Humane Education Director
- A Veterinary Technician
- Four kennel staff
- Four 1/2 front desk staff
- Three humane officers

After reviewing our operational structure we decided that cross-training employees, increasing individual productivity, and making maximum use of our volunteer resources would allow us to increase spending in areas that directly save lives.

We now have:
- An Executive Director
- A Shelter Manager
- A Development Director
- A Veterinary Technician
- Two and 1/2 kennel staff
- Two front desk staff
- Two humane officers

Case in Point: Humane Education

Shelters offer humane education programs hoping children will grow up with more humane views than their parents. In communities nationwide, shelter employees, often with dogs and cats in tow, enter classroom after classroom where overworked teachers needing a break meet them with relief, and wide-eyed school children pet animals while grinning from ear to ear. Meanwhile, generations of shelter directors boast to their constituents about the number of school children they are reaching with their humane message and promising that the light at the end of the tunnel—the mythical place where animals are cherished and have lifetime homes—is as close as the emancipation of these kids. It is a lovely thought.

But has this effort ever been challenged to see if it actually gets results? In fact, no shelter director—not a single one—can point to any: Are more animals being sterilized because of humane education? Are people keeping their pets longer? Is the death rate at the shelter declining because of it? Will these children grow up to be more responsible pet owners? No one has any answers. Despite tight budgets and cuts in areas of animal care, shelters continue to send legions of staff members into classrooms without any proof that it has, is having, or ever hopes to have any impact whatsoever on the death rate in shelters. 150 years of humane education has yet to produce a single study showing it has made any difference.

In reducing the numbers of staff, we did not reduce programs and services to help animals. In fact, we *increased* programs, *increased* services, and *increased* lives saved!

Add Necessary Programs & Staff
With fewer managers, less staff, and less fluff, the TC SPCA could afford to increase ourprograms and still save money. We:

- Hired a dog trainer
- Went from sterilizing 10% of shelter animals before adoption to sterilizing 100%
- Started a TNR program with free spay/neuter for feral cats
- Created the Angel Fund to provide surgery and other medical procedures to save injured pets

Each one of these programs directly impacts "hard to place" pets, yet previously the shelter believed it could not afford to implement them.

Is it expensive to save lives?
Yes, but it is also cost effective...

...if you cut unneeded positions and programs, you will have extra revenue for spay/neuter, medical care, adoption incentives, and other truly lifesaving programs. And the community will donate more if you are successful and show them that you spend their money wisely!

In the period 2000-2002, the TC SPCA went from a shelter:
- That was killing 100% of feral cats to killing none
- That was killing healthy dogs and cats to killing none
- That was killing treatable sick/injured dogs and cats to killing none
- That reduced the death rate by 75%
- That spayed/neutered 10% of animals prior to adoption to 100%

Yes, all of this costs money, but in that same time period, we...
- Reduced total expenses by approximately $150,000 per year
- Reduced the number of employees from 16 to 12
- Went from a $150,000 a year annual budget deficit to a $23,000 operations surplus
- Nearly doubled the average gift

If we can do it, anyone can!

Step 3: Pet Retention

Programs and strategies to promote pet retention are more effective if you can offer them *before* people come to you wanting to surrender the pet. The more a community sees the local shelter as an expert resource on all animal-related issues, the more chance you have to solve problems before they lead to surrender.

Develop and cultivate your role as expert every chance you get:

✓ *Take advantage of free pet behavior advice*—you don't need board certified behaviorists. Instead, use resources available in your community. In Tompkins County, volunteer Sandy Snyder fosters about 100 cats for the TC SPCA every year—all of whom go on to find homes. Through her volunteer work, she has seen and solved a lot of behavior problems. Although she has had no formal training (she is an automobile mechanic and shop owner by trade) she has a wealth of information on cat behavior problems.

And Bob Sherwood knows more about litterbox problems than anyone else in Upstate New York. Why? If a cat is surrendered to the TC SPCA for such a problem, the cat goes to Bob's place for fostering and rehabilitation. Bob works in a DNA lab by formal training, and he is a cat lover (and life saver) by experience. Shelters can also tap into resources like dog and cat fanciers, local training clubs, and feral cat caretakers.

✓ *Train staff and volunteers in behavior basics* so that when they answer the phone or have contact with the public they can offer simple, *effective* solutions. Feel free to use TC SPCA materials, which are available on our website.

✓ *Make it easier for people to have pets by encouraging pro-pet policies in your area.* For example, develop a pet-friendly rental listing and promote businesses like groomers, supply stores, poop scoop services, dog walkers, pet sitters, and doggy daycare. The TC SPCA promotes more businesses than the yellow pages at no cost to merchants, and the public gains more resources for properly caring for their pets.

These services not only help prevent pet surrender, the make your community a more pet-friendly, pet-knowledgeable place, which in turn makes it easier to find good homes for your hard to place animals.

Step 4: Comprehensive Adoption Programs

Adoptions are—or should be—the cornerstone of every animal shelter's operations. You've heard it before, and we'll say it again: shelters must develop comprehensive adoption programs:

✓ *Public Access Adoption Hours.* Believe it or not, some shelters still close at or before 5:00 every day. Even under-funded libraries have public access hours. Being accessible to the public doesn't necessarily mean more hours, just different ones. For example, instead of being open 9 am to 5 pm when most people are at work, try opening at 11 am and closing at 7 pm. That way working people have a chance to adopt or reclaim lost pets. In addition, stay open on weekends and close a different day, say Monday when most people are just starting their work week and may be too busy to visit the shelter.

✓ *Offsite Adoptions.* If the people can't come to the animals, bring the animals to the people. People love seeing pets where they work and play.

✓ *Special Events.* Attend church bazaars, business ribbon cuttings, car sales events, blues festivals—any neighborhood/community event. We even attended a Harley Davidson motorcycle festival! And don't hesitate to develop your own special events. Some of the events the TC SPCA puts on include:

• Home for the Holidays—we have animals available for adoption at the local mall every day of the month in December, and Santa will personally deliver the new pet.

• Every Valentine's Day weekend we have pets available at the same mall, and Cupid provides a nice card for each adopter.

• Dog Days—every September, to increase dog adoptions, we offer several special incentives.

• Twice the fun, twice the love, not twice the cost! During kitten season, two adult cats can be adopted for the price of one.

> **When people adopt a pet from the Tompkins County SPCA, these are the goodies they receive:**
>
> - Free health exam at any local vet
> - Free dog grooming at local pet salon
> - 10% discount at pet supply store
> - Free dog behavior advice for life
> - Free month of dog doodoo pick up
> - Free engraved pet I.D. tag
> - Free bag of pet food
> - 10% discount at puppy class
> - 10% discount for pet massage
> - Pet Lover's Guide to New Pet
> - Free bag of goodies
> - Discount at local coffee shop
> - Periodically: free video, free Kong, free collars/leashes, etc.
>
> **We pay nothing for these incentives—they are all provided by local businesses for free in an effort to gain clients.**

✓ *Foster Care Program.* This is a must not only for saving easy to place animals like healthy kittens, but for rehabilitating and training hard to place animals as well.

✓ *Rescue Groups.* By working closely with rescue groups—purebreed or otherwise—shelters can not only increase adoptions, but also tap into group members' knowledge about fostering, training, behavior

✓ *Incentives.* Talk to local businesses—most are delighted at an opportunity to promote problem resolution and more.

Step 5: Presentation

Let the animals sell themselves by cleaning them up, making the shelter a fun and inviting place, and giving the dogs a few skills.

✓ Work with groomers in your area to make your pets look their best.

✓ Place toys in cages with the animals—it looks homey and adds color to the animals' surroundings.

✓ Just as people are more likely to enter a store where others are already shopping, the same holds true for shelter animals. So make sure you have adoption counselors and dog/cat socializer volunteers working with the animals at your peak visitation hours. People are drawn to an animal who is interacting with a person. Simply having a volunteer petting an older cat or sitting in the lobby with a long-term dog can make all difference.

✓ Let people take animals out of their cages and play with them in a comfortable setting. Potential adopters will stay longer, and are more likely to adopt.

✓ If you have the space, set up a doggy pool and/or have Frisbees and tennis balls in a fenced yard, and invite the people to walk and play with the dogs.

✓ Give your hard to place dogs an edge—training. Teach your longer-term shelter guests how to shake hands, sit, and roll over. Adopters love it! Not only does a little basic training promote the dog, it helps ensure a more permanent placement!

Step 6: Promote Your Pets

Every animal has a story—a story that will help open homes and hearts. Telling that story gives the animal a personality for potential adopters to relate to, and people love to adopt animals who have been on television, radio, or in the newspaper. Promoting just one pet in these media outlets generally results in multiple adoptions the same day.

Take Justine for example. She was a blind kitten who came to our shelter with her four blind siblings. We featured Justine in our "pet of the week" spot in the local paper and 20 people showed up to adopt her. Not only did we find Justine a wonderful home with people who could handle her special needs, but her four siblings were adopted into equally good homes—all as a result of one free newspaper spot!

These are some other venues for promoting your hard to place pets:
- Radio PSAs (The FCC requires radio stations to allocate time for free public service announcements. Take advantage of it!)
- Public access television
- Pet of the Week Feature
- Local radio programs
- Pet advice column
- Press releases
- Posters in windows of local businesses
- Speak to community groups— bring an animal!
- Offsite adoptions

This is how we promoted Grandpa, the very elderly dog pictured on Page 6:

"Hello, I am a little old man. I like to sleep a lot. And I don't cause too much trouble. I don't hear so good, so if you sneak up on me, I get a bit spooked and flinch. So you need to make sure I see you when you want my attention.

I know kids today like a dog who can chase a ball and stuff. I'd like to play but I don't really have the energy. Someone left me here to die, but I don't want to. I want to live. I want to sleep inside for a little while. Do you have space in your heart and your home for me?

I promise not to be too much trouble. All I want is a little love and dignity at the end of my days."

Well, Grandpa was adopted soon after we told his story on our website.

Tippy, a run-of-the-mill black cat, sat at our shelter for three months. So we told his sad story in the local paper. Thirteen people came to adopt him when the feature appeared, and we adopted out Tippy and six other cats the first hour we were open!

SIMON WHEELER/Journal Staff

TIPPY

17-C. That's my official SPCA number. What that means is that I am the 17th cat to come in this year, way back on Jan. 8. That makes me the longest term guest at the SPCA. I am full of fine manners and am very friendly, but I keep getting passed over. The SPCA is already in the mid-300s for cats, which means I have sat here while over 300 cats have come and gone. The good folks at the SPCA think I deserve a chance too, so they have waived all my fees for the right home. They'll even throw in a free bag of cat food and a free visit to the Tompkins County veterinarian of your choice. Come meet me, "Tippy," a fine fellow down on his luck.

The Tompkins County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is located at 1640 Hanshaw Road in Ithaca. Our hours are from noon to 5:30 p.m. daily. For more information, call the SPCA at 257-1822. The Pet Project appears in House & Garden every Friday. Visit other adoptable animals online at www.SPCAonline.com

Keep in mind that you also need to promote your hard to place pets in the shelter itself. Adoption counselors, volunteers, and staff can be these animals' biggest allies. For example, some potential adopters enjoy having personalized "shopping" assistance. Adoption counselors can accompany people through the shelter, talking with them and directing them to some of the harder to place animals. Asking shelter staff and volunteers to take a personal interest in certain animals can also pay off: If they will spread the word at work, church, or social groups; to friends, family, email lists, etc., your hard to place pets can reach a much wider audience. Networking helps animals, too!

When promoting your hard to place pets, be up front about their problems. If a cat is grumpy and doesn't like petting, say so. There are people out there who *will* adopt him! If you have an old dog who doesn't do much, explain that. Someone *will* want to give the senior a loving home for the rest of his days.

Good homes can be found for all the old, "ugly," big dogs. The shy cats. The compromised pets most shelters would deem "unadoptable." All of them.

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Other publications available from the Tompkins County SPCA:

General Information
• A Shelter Guide to Saving Dogs, Cats, and Other Animals
• Volunteer Applications
• Foster Parent Applications
• Why Adopt from The TC SPCA?
• How to Find a New Home for Your Pet
• Spay/Neuter—Why? Where? How Much?

Dog Behavior & Care
• Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Dog
• What Dogs Want
• Off-Leash Dog Parks
• Kong is King
• Ten Steps to Doggy Bliss
• Choke and Shock Collars
• Puppy Development
• House Training
• Barking
• Helping the Shy or Fearful Dog

Cat Behavior & Care
• Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Cat
• Raising Kittens
• Coping with Cat Allergies
• Upper Respiratory Infection

Small Pets
• Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Rabbit
• Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Mouse, Rat, or Guinea Pig

Wildlife
• Living With Wildlife
• Humane Bird Deterrents
• Humane Mice Deterrents
• Humane Raccoon and Skunk Deterrents
• Humane Woodchuck Deterrents
• Avoiding Road Accidents with Wildlife
• Humane Cat Deterrents

Feral Cats
• Trap, Neuter & Return
• Care & Feeding of Feral Cats
• Feral Cats & Public Safety
• Humane Trapping
• Feral Cat Medical Issues
• Post-Surgery Recovery Care
• Raising Feral Kittens
• Feral Cat Socialization
• Feral Cat Relocation
• Resolving Neighbor Conflicts
• Feral Cats in Winter