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Thou Shalt Not Kill

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Non-Lethal Shelters are the New “Humane Societies”

by Jennifer Lucich

Imagine having a death sentence over your head, and hoping against hope for an unlikely reprieve. It sounds cruel and unusual, but it’s reality for millions of animals living in pet shelters. Their fate rests on their “adoptability” and the ability of a shelter to accommodate them. About five million cats and dogs are killed every year in the U.S. because there is not enough room to house them in adoption centers, and not enough people adopting.

The “no-kill” shelter movement, which saves the lives of healthy and treatable dogs and cats (reserving euthanasia only for animals that can’t be rehabilitated), is an attempt to derail that grim cycle. According to Maddie’s Fund, a nonprofit pet rescue foundation that offers financial support to no-kill shelters, “An adoption guarantee gives a community confidence that an animal shelter is truly a shelter, that is, a respite on the way to a new loving home. When this happens, the community becomes an active partner in saving lives.”

The goal is to end the popular notion of shelters as a last resort—and likely terminal point—for unwanted pets. When people can be confident that animals sent to the shelter will not be euthanized, “They won’t abandon them on the street or leave them tied up in the backyard,” says Maddie’s Fund. “And these healthy animals can then be placed, which then reduces shelter deaths and euthanasia costs.”

There are 5,000 traditional shelters in the U.S., and only 250 are no-kill, so it remains a small movement. But the no-kill movement is growing, and shelters are popping up all over the country. There are no-kill outposts in San Francisco, Richmond, Virginia, Miami and Austin, Texas. There are proposals in the works for Los Angeles and Philadelphia.



No-kill activist Rich Avanzino.

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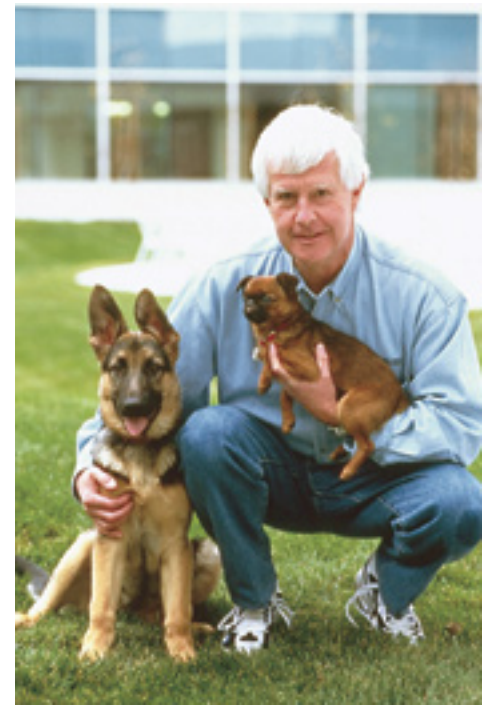
Jim Mason is managing director of Two Mauds Foundation, which gives grants to grassroots animal-protection organizations (including no-kill shelters) and author of *The Unnatural Order*. He says that no-kill shelters can be successful because the people organizing them are “knowledgeable, dedicated and motivated.”

Mason adds that “transitioning to no-kill should be the goal for all shelters.” This goal has become a greater possibility because of Maddie’s Fund, launched in 1999 as the family foundation of PeopleSoft founder Dave Duffield and his wife, Cheryl. The fund has already given \$33 million to the cause.

In early 2005, Maddie’s Fund pledged \$15.5 million over the next seven years to the Mayor’s

Alliance for New York City Animals to help transition the city's shelters to no-kill. New York's change in policy is likely to be extremely influential because of the huge media spotlight on the city, and supporters think it could be a catalyst to motivate other communities. Maddie's Fund President Rich Avanzino says, "If it happens in New York, then it can happen anywhere else."

The city is working toward the no-kill goal through innovative programs designed to increase the adoption of homeless pets and the number of animals that are spayed or neutered. (Low-cost spay/neuter programs play a vital role in the success of no-kill shelters by reducing the unwanted pet supply. New York will host such services at many locations in all five boroughs.) A mobile adoption program has showcased homeless pets at various locations, including Central Park and Prospect Park. The program promotes awareness for the no-kill mission and gives New Yorkers a chance to play with the animals that need a home. Future adoption events may display the animals in department store windows to grab shoppers' attention.



Maddie's Fund founder Dave Duffield.

© Maddie's Fund

Other cities are making headway also. Mobile, Alabama animal welfare groups and veterinarians will receive as much as \$4.6 million through Maddie's Fund to end the killing of healthy and treatable shelter dogs and cats within 10 years. No More Homeless Pets in Utah is a statewide coalition of 28 rescue groups, 55 animal control agencies, one traditional shelter and 89 private practice veterinary hospitals. In 1999, 45,909 cats and dogs were euthanized statewide in Utah (13,306 of them healthy); in 2003, No More Homeless Pets in Utah reduced total shelter deaths to 36,121, while increasing adoptions by 10,827. Nearly 71,000 cats and dogs were spayed or neutered over the four-year period.

Avanzino says the key to building the no-kill movement's success is to "challenge the status-quo, come up with new ideas, test results, capitalize on ideas and reject disappointments." Before going to work at Maddie's Fund, Avanzino was president of the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and a leader in the city's transition to the country's first no-kill policy in 1989. He created a model pet shelter, which was inspirational in changing attitudes toward the care and housing of homeless animals. The model shelter offers well-kept spacious living conditions with an abundance of toys, playful volunteers and social interaction among the animals.

Avanzino attributes these successes to focusing on an attainable first step, and then building from there. Maddie's Fund is working "toward a nationwide adoption guarantee for all healthy shelter cats and dogs" by controlling pet populations and raising the social acceptance of animal adoptions (ultimately taking business away from commercial "puppy mills" and other profit-making and sometimes unscrupulous enterprises).

Mason says he supports aggressive advocacy for the education and awareness of pets' needs. "People need to be more conscientious and more progressive in their understanding of animals," he says. When the goal of a no-kill nation has finally been reached, the next step for Maddie's Fund "will be to save the sick and injured pets in animal shelters nationwide," Avanzino says.

Despite the positive changes sparked by the no-kill movement, no-kill shelters are often criticized for rejecting animals that managers don't think are adoptable. Mason says that in "an ideal world" all needy pets would be accepted, but selectivity is necessary to ensure that all the animals are eventually adopted. Even some animals already in no-kill shelters have difficulty finding a home.

Maureen D'Addio, a volunteer at Animal Haven, a no-kill shelter in North Haven, Connecticut, says that the "dogs in highest demand are the smaller and younger ones." The dogs that stay the longest in the shelter—months at a time, are usually large, old and darkly colored.

Animal Haven is clearly a different place from a standard shelter. Cats are given time to roam freely around the well-lit living space, and each dog has an individual outside play area. The bright and upbeat volunteers, some as young as 15, work to keep the morale of the pets high.

Avanzino says the hardest obstacle to achieving a nationwide no-kill network is the organizations that refuse to work together in achieving the common goal. He suggests that shelters around the country "should join together and stop the bash-and-trash in order to focus on how to do a better job."

But the no-kill movement is growing, albeit more slowly than its impatient supporters would like to see. "If the focus is kept on saving lives, miracles can happen," Avanzino says.

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