

No Kill Sheltering – The Animal Help Desk

No-Kill Conference May 2009

Our Results at Nevada Humane Society

Nevada Humane Society became a no-kill organization and set the goal of creating a no-kill community in Washoe County in February of 2007.

Incoming Pets:

- 2.4% decline in incoming dogs and cats at Nevada Humane Society (NHS) and Washoe County Regional Animal Services (WCRAS) in 2008 (over 2007).
- 2.1% decline in incoming dogs and cats at Nevada Humane Society (NHS) and Washoe County Regional Animal Services (WCRAS) in 2007 (over 2006).
- 15,560 incoming dogs and cats in 2008 (NHS and WCRAS), 15,948 in 2007, and 16,291 in 2006.



Animal Help Desk:

- Our free Animal Help Desk responded to 20,295 calls and e-mails from residents seeking help with animal-related problems in 2008.
- Launched in July of 2007, our Animal Help Desk responded to over 8,400 calls and e-mails in its first six months.

Succeeding for the Animals

To succeed for the animals, you need to increase the number of pets that leave alive and reduce the number of pets coming into the shelter.

For information on how to increase adoptions, check out our handout for Turbo-charging Pet Adoptions.

When it comes to reducing the numbers arriving at the shelter, it goes without saying that spaying and neutering pets is key, but helping to keep pets in homes is another way you can have an immediate impact.

Animal shelters should be places of last resort for animals, just as a shelter would be for people. If we encourage people to drop pets off at shelters, we are endorsing the concept that pets are disposable. Rather, we should be encouraging and enabling people to do the right thing. The person will feel better knowing they have done the best they can for their pet, and of course, the pet benefits, too.

Establish an Animal Help Desk.

You are probably only too familiar with the reasons why people bring animals to shelters or abandon them, but what you may not know (or believe) is that many of these situations can be resolved in a way that will keep the animals out of the shelters.

Most pet owners are not animal behavior experts and not everyone is good at problem solving, but we have found that many people are willing to try a few things to help keep their pet. Our suggestions may include behavior modification, training, minor changes to the environment, vet care, or – if they really cannot keep the pet – making the effort to find a new home for the pet themselves. Sometimes we provide practical assistance like vet services, free spay/neuter services, or pet food, but in most cases all the caller needs is a bit of information and moral support.

The need for these services is great. Our Animal Help Desk received 300 requests the first week it opened which quickly increased to nearly 400 calls and e-mails per week.



Training volunteer or staff to handle calls

Our Animal Help Desk Handbook:

We are happy to share our Animal Help Desk Handbook with other organizations who want to establish such a program for their community. You can adapt it for your needs and use it to train volunteers or staff to manage incoming calls and e-mails.

I guarantee that you'll read it and find something in it that makes you think; "I can't believe they actually tell people that! I don't agree with that advice!" The point is not that we have hit on the perfect way to handle

every situation, but rather that it can serve as a model for you to create your own manual, incorporating your own policies and programs to train others to help with the calls.

Establishing clear guidelines for how you want calls handled is important to ensure that consistent and accurate information is being given out by staff and volunteers.

Staffing the Help Desk: We were able to hire a staff member to handle calls, but we have helped establish other help desks that were run entirely by volunteers.

Volunteers can be scheduled to pick up messages and return calls or e-mails. The volunteer who picks up the messages should function like a triage nurse – determining which are critical and who should return them.

Over time, some of your phone volunteers will cultivate areas of expertise. For example, one volunteer might be especially effective at handling calls from people who are moving and another volunteer may be most skilled at handling complex feral cat situations. Your most diplomatic volunteer might be willing to handle the few, truly difficult people you may encounter.

The goal of Help Desk staff and volunteers

Encouraging Involvement: The goal of our Animal Help Desk staff is to involve the individual in solving the problem. There are several good reasons for this goal.

First, most humane organizations simply cannot manage all of the problems that occur in their local communities every day – given the space, resources, and volunteers available. But even if they could do it all, it would be wise to enlist the help and support of the community. After all, our mission, as humane organizations, is to create a more compassionate society. The only way to

do that is by touching the hearts and minds of the individuals that make up our community. And we can start with the folks that call us on the phone.

Your phone volunteers should be trained to be possibility thinkers, to empower the individual to help by providing information, encouragement and support, and to bring out the best in the caller. Is this a big challenge? You bet! But that's our mission – to get people involved, to empower them, and to create a truly humane society in the largest sense.

Naturally, they will not be successful all the time, but when they are, they often find that they have created a powerful change in the lives of the people and animals involved. Some of the organization's best volunteers and most loyal donors are the same folks who first called for help. The experience of putting compassion for animals into action in your own life has no doubt had a positive impact on you, and no less can be true for many other people out there. Callers will feel more involved with the animal and your organization, because they participated in the process of solving the problem.

Promoting Trap/Neuter/Return

The Humane Solution for Feral Cats: In addition to providing pet behavior information and guidance through life's changes (like moving or having a new baby), our Animal Help Desk also aggressively promotes Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR). TNR programs have been proven to dramatically reduce the number of cats coming into area shelters and improve the lives of outdoor cats. A TNR program is very cost effective and immensely popular with the public.

People who want to surrender feral cats to animal shelters often mistakenly believe that they are doing the cat a service and that the kitty has a chance of being adopted as a pet. We work to present a more accurate picture for the caller about the fate of feral cats in animal control shelters and offer the alternative of TNR. Once people learn that the cat will be okay if they are neutered and allowed to keep living outside and that impoundment usually leads to death, many opt for TNR.



A recent survey showed that 81% of the public would rather see the cat live out their life outdoors than be destroyed in an animal control facility. One program run by Alley Cat Allies demonstrated that dedicated, skilled advocates could resolve over 90% of the incoming complaint calls about feral cats with TNR.

We're fortunate to have a local group, Community Cats, that has been providing free spay/neuter services for feral cats for the last six years. If such a program does not exist in your community, you can work with volunteers to get one started. You can find everything you need to know about how to start a TNR program on the Alley Cat Allies website at www.alleycat.org. There are grant monies available for providing spay/neuter surgeries for feral cats, but even without them, TNR is more cost effective than taking feral cats into shelters to be killed.

Provide Referrals

Information Clearing House: Running an Animal Help Desk does not mean that you provide all the services. You can function as a clearing house gathering information on all the animals related resources in your community for low-cost spay/neuter, vaccination clinics, rescue groups, dog training, pet-friendly housing options, and wildlife rehabilitation, and then providing this information to your callers.

Promoting the Animal Help Desk

Reach Out to the Public: Don't forget to promote your Animal Help Desk so that people know that its available and free. We use all the standard ways to get the word out about it; news releases, flyers, posters, ads, business cards, PSAs. We also work with Animal Services so that their staff can refer people to the Animal Help Desk.

In-Person Animal Help

Never Give Up on Finding Alternatives: It is easier to turn things around over the phone than it is in person, but our staff members who work in the surrender room are trained to try to find a solution other than taking the pet into the shelter. We have a script that is used in the surrender room to guide the discussion and explore alternatives. Admissions staff is trained to be polite, sympathetic, and helpful, while at the same time, asking non-judgmental questions about why they are surrendering the pet.



Many people experience guilt about surrendering a pet, and while they may not welcome the information initially, some people warm to the idea of keeping their pet once they see that there may be a solution to the problem.

We try to find solutions to allow them to keep their pet. We offer free spays or neuters, behavioral advice, solutions to lifestyle changes (pet-friendly apartment listings, information on pets and babies), and food to low-income pet owners). Unless we feel that the situation is unsafe for the animal, we try to do whatever we can to keep a pet in their home or to encourage the person to seek a home for their pet themselves.

We often give out Best Friends Animal Society's booklet, *How to Find Homes for Homeless Pets*.

It does not work every time, but it is surprising how often it does work. The happiness of a person who has hit upon a solution is as rewarding as knowing that we have kept a pet in their home. Even better still, some of these individuals go on to become advocates for the animals.

*"Effective people are not problem-minded;
they're opportunity-minded.
They feed opportunities and starve problems."
—Steven Covey*

*"Stay committed to your decisions,
but stay flexible in your approach."
— Tom Robbins*