

No Kill in the Crosshairs



Regressive shelters and their national allies have long painted No Kill in an unfair and untrue light. Roger Caras, the late-President of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals called No Kill a “hoax.” The National Animal Control Association published articles indicating that No Kill was a “delusion” and perhaps even “cruel.” And the Humane Society of the United States has likened them to a “glorified collector” at worst, and as leading to animal abandonment at best. This type of cynicism has in design only one purpose: to defend those who are doing a poor job at saving lives from public criticism and public accountability by painting a picture of the alternative as even darker. We’ll debunk these myths.

The Animal Hoarding Myth

It’s been alleged more than once,” writes one commentator, “that No Kill shelters are institutionalized hoarders who use their non-profit status to raise money to add to their collections.” The picture these naysayers have painted of No Kill is one where dogs and cats live out their lives in filthy, cramped quarters prone to disease and mental deterioration.

It is a point of view that has been spread with such venom and rigor that some animal lovers have started to believe it. No Kill shelters, a rescuer writes, “are nothing more than collection stations where animals are condemned to live (if you can call it that) the rest of their lives spending the hot summers in sweltering heat and humidity and most of the rest of the year in rain, mud, muck and cold... I have come to realize that there are worse things than death, and that No Kill has only become an excuse for hoarding!”

Animal hoarding, however, has nothing to do with the No Kill movement. The No Kill movement seeks to end unnecessary shelter killing. Animal hoarding, by contrast,

is not about the animals. It is a mental illness and a crime perpetrated by individuals. And it should be treated and punished as such. That some hoarders might call themselves “No Kill shelters” is irrelevant. If No Kill did not exist, they would just call themselves “caring pet owners.” Would we condemn pet owning because of that? Of course not. Indeed, newspapers and news stations periodically report stories of child abuse perpetrated by foster families. Does that mean we should condemn foster care for children? Should we call for the elimination of orphanages and demand that killing of homeless children be the norm? Why then do we allow groups to paint a distorted picture of No Kill shelters? And, more importantly, why do we believe and internalize these pernicious representations?

If anything, true hoarders thrive in high kill shelter communities because they can rationalize to their friends and family the accumulation of too many animals. They have no choice but to keep these animals, they say, because their local shelter will only

kill them. With shelters committed to No Kill solutions, there would be no excuses.

But instead of No Kill shelters and No Kill communities, we have the opposite—a community of shelters, protected by misinformation from their national shelter allies. Shelters that are firmly grounded in killing, have no foster care program, won't let volunteers in the shelter, are opposed to non-lethal feral cat programs like Trap-Neuter-Return, limit the number of pets a family can have, won't work with rescue groups, and don't proactively address the issues of homelessness. This appears to be what these shelters, the national groups who legitimize them, and people who have internalized the "No Kill equals hoarding" view seem to be advocating for. They are trumpeting the cause of failure.



So when so-called "animal advocates" imply that it is acceptable to kill animals because the alternative is a shelter that is overcrowded, where no one gets vaccinated, where filth is the norm, and therefore we should kill animals because otherwise they do not enjoy quality of life, we become our own worst enemies.

There is a false assumption at work here, the fault of which lies with the traditional "catch and kill" crowd. The rise of the No Kill movement has led to severe defensiveness and outright maliciousness on the part of the architects of the status quo. Groups like the Humane Society of the United States, American Humane Association, and many local animal control agencies, have

painted a distorted picture of No Kill to deflect blame for the killing.

In an article entitled "I Used to Work at a 'No-Kill' Shelter," a program coordinator for HSUS writes that she left a No Kill shelter because she "wanted to be a shelter worker again, not a glorified collector." Another HSUS staff member stated last year that "in order to be No Kill, you have to adopt Pit Bulls to dog fighters." Yet another stated that feral cat caretakers were "closet hoarders." True animal lovers need to stop

listening, and more importantly, internalizing these viewpoints. The views of HSUS on this issue should be rejected. We must accept the reality that opponents of No Kill will mislead and obfuscate,

and that no matter how hard apologists for killing try to pretend otherwise, that HSUS and other reactionary agencies are not part of our movement.

In fact, No Kill is the opposite of hoarding, it is the opposite of filth, and it is the opposite of lack of veterinary care. In 1998, No Kill advocates in California pushed a major animal shelter reform package through the State Legislature. One aspect of the reform was the requirement that shelters had to provide care to impounded animals (socialization, nutrition and veterinary care.) It also required shelters to assess cats to differentiate between feral cats and shy or frightened cats. It required shelters to offer

animals for adoption. It required them to provide lost and found information to the public. And more.

The law was uniformly supported by No Kill shelters and rescue groups around the state. It was, however, opposed by many of the large national organizations and by virtually every major animal control shelter in the state with a few notable and progressive exceptions. This is what

happens when you value animals so little that killing them for expediency becomes preferable to putting in place a foster care program, a medical and behavior rehabilitation program, to opening the shelter up to the scrutiny of the public and to their support through a volunteer program, by sterilizing rather than killing feral cats, and by taking animals to offsite adoption locations to better help find them homes.

In fact, there are a lot of traditional shelters that are filthy. Their logic: Why clean so much? Why spend the money on vaccinations? Why provide veterinary care? Why socialize the animals? Why do all of these things—which require enormous compassion and dedication—when you are just going to kill the animals anyway? There are also many that are very clean. In the latter case, where animals are well cared for, vaccinated, provided routine veterinary care, and are socialized—for the five days before they are injected with poison from a bottle marked “Fatal-plus” and their bodies thrown in an incinerator.

So to imply that No Kill by definition means filth and hoarding is a cynicism that has in design only one purpose: to defend those who are doing a poor job at saving lives

from public criticism and public accountability by painting a picture of the alternative as even darker. The philosophical underpinning of the No Kill movement is to put actions behind the words of every shelter’s mission statement: “All life is precious.” No Kill is about valuing animals. And valuing animals not only means saving their lives, it means good quality care.

If anything, true hoarders thrive in high kill shelter communities because they can rationalize to their friends and family the accumulation of too many animals. They have no choice but to keep these animals, they say, because their local shelter will only kill them.

Saving lives requires a shelter to keep animals healthy and happy, make the shelter more inviting for the public, and allow animals to move through the system as quickly as possible. Animals who become sick reduce a community’s ability to save lives. And while it is impossible to completely eliminate disease-causing pathogens in a shelter environment, a good cleaning and disinfecting protocol, combined with vaccinations and socialization, can vastly reduce their impact.

Remember, No Kill doesn’t mean announcing a policy change and then getting bogged down with animals because you do not have programs to keep animals moving through the system and into loving homes. No Kill means comprehensive implementation of the U.S. No Kill Declaration which includes adoption, foster care, transfer to rescue groups, pet retention programs, spay/neuter, and helping people overcome medical, behavior and environmental conditions which may cause people to relinquish their animals. Doing so eliminates the problem of “overcrowding,” unreasonably feared by sincere animal lovers and unfairly painted by cynical proponents of the status quo.

The Animal Abandonment Myth

“Many times I’ve heard the statement made that No Kill shelters can exist only because someone else down the street is doing the killing,” writes one commentator. “The implication is that No Kill shelters are derelict because they refuse to kill animals.”

Once again, groups like HSUS and others have attempted to demonize the No Kill movement. In a recent article, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PeTA) claimed that “There’s not a ‘no-kill’ shelter in this country that does not turn animals away every single day.” Another advocate of the status quo, Sue Sternberg, the champion of regressive dog policies, writes “A no-kill shelter really can’t have an open admission policy. It must limit its intake if it wants to adopt out animals and not kill them.” One of the top veterinarians at the ASPCA in a textbook on shelter

medicine states “Because the term no-kill can be inflammatory and misleading, and many of these shelters are able to reduce their euthanasia numbers by limiting their admissions, they will from this point hereon be referred to as ‘limited admission’ shelters.” Go to the HSUS website and look for articles on No Kill and you are told to “See Limited Admission.” Once again, the goal is singular: to defend killing as morally justifiable by painting a picture of the alternative as darker. And once again, the claims are misleading.

The Tompkins County SPCA, for example, is an open admission, No Kill animal control agency. The shelter provides all impoundment and animal sheltering services in Tompkins County, NY and so ensures that the entire community is No Kill. A shelter or community can be “open admission” and still be No Kill. The problem, however, is that HSUS and others have ignored the success in Tompkins County and so have not promoted it as a model for others to follow. They have not endorsed the programs and services that made it possible. More importantly, they have not used their significant resources to help other



communities follow suit. As a result, it is true that at this point of time in history many No Kill shelters are not “open admission.” But that is just a matter of time—time that will take longer than necessary because of continued opposition from those mired in the failed philosophies of the past.

But the problem runs deeper. If, for example, private shelters are going to take in all animals on behalf of government, they should demand adequate resources to do the job. The era when private shelters killed animals on behalf of government because government refuses to value their lives and provide enough resources to handle the volume of animals humanely and responsibly is over. Government belongs to the citizens. And as citizens, we have a right to expect that our tax dollars go to programs that reflect our values.

As stated in the Preamble to the U.S. No Kill Declaration, “Today, most Americans hold the humane treatment of animals as a personal value, which is reflected in our laws, cultural practices, the proliferation of organizations founded for their protection, increased per capita spending on animal care, and great advancements in veterinary medicine. But the

agencies that the public expects to protect animals are instead killing more than five million of them..”

Indeed, the irony of the “open door” shelter crowd is that many of their facilities are little more than open doors to the killing of homeless animals. They are often so enmeshed in their “open door” philosophy that they are blind to any proactive steps that might limit the numbers of animals coming in through those doors or increase the numbers of animals adopted.

In the final analysis, “open door” does not necessarily mean “more humane” when the end result is mass killing.