

SHELTER MAR: A Paradigm Shift to Reduce Shelter Kill Rates

Presenter:

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Every dog and cat that escapes from the care of its guardian is a "stray" that contributes to the overcrowding of our shelters. A great majority of the stray dogs that end up in shelters were not born in the wild nor were they living in wild packs. Most *escaped from a home* where they were cared for by someone who simply failed to keep the animal contained. In this workshop you'll learn how behaviors (human and feline) contribute to the drastically low (2%) RTO rates of shelter cats, why some guardians fail to show up at shelters to reclaim lost pets, and ten new services (called Shelter Missing Animal Response or MAR) that your shelter can offer to help reduce kill rates of unclaimed stray dogs and cats.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Brief History / Background

B. Why Lost Pets? (Industry focus is currently on spay/neuter and forever home adoptions. Sadly, there's very little effort invested in returning lost companion animals to their original homes)

II. WHAT IS A “STRAY?”

A. To wander about without a destination or purpose; to be loose and roaming.

1. A stray dog or cat DOES NOT mean it is a “homeless” animal or an animal without a guardian...it simply is a companion animal who has escaped custody of his caregiver.

B. STRAY DOGS: In most cases, a stray dog is a missing/lost dog that has not yet be found by his guardian.

C. STRAY CATS: A stray cat can be an untamed feral cat, an escaped house cat, or a displaced cat whose guardian is not known. All three categories can exhibit the same “feral like” behavior (hissing, spitting, growling, twirling in a cage)

III. WHY ARE SO MANY STRAYS UNCLAIMED?

A. Lack of a Central Clearinghouse (see “**Lost Pet / Lost Person Comparative Analysis**)

B. Shelter logistics (hours, location)

C. Shelter policies (fine involved, must come down to shelter)

D. Physical limitations (disabled, elderly, no transportation)

E. Emotional limitations (grief avoidance, shelter phobic, hopeless)

F. Discouragement (from untrained professionals)

G. Cultural limitations (language barriers, cultural ignorance, fear of uniforms)

H. Searching at wrong location (multiple shelters, timing of the entry into the shelter)

I. Human and animal behaviors are a major contributing factor to permanent the displacement of lost companion animals! (Refer to “The Lost Pet Triad”)

J. Tunnel Vision (cat owner believed animal communicator instead of standard search advice – even with previous experience of a cat taken to a shelter!)

- K. Expecting grieving, broken-hearted people who have no hope to continue a sustained search effort **without offering assistance** contributes to high euthanasia rates!
- IV. WHAT FACTORS INHIBIT THE RECOVERY OF LOST COMPANION ANIMALS?
- A. The moment a dog or cat escapes from his guardian's care, the terminology used for that animal and how people (rescuers) respond to that animal **DRASTICALLY CHANGE**
 - B. Vernacular used by rescuers influences their behavior and ultimately what happens to the dog (i.e. re-homed with no efforts to re-unite)
 - C. Lost companion animals viewed as "sad" by shelters but not as a serious contributing factor to the amount of unclaimed strays they hold in their cages and then euthanize
 - D. Pet Detectives viewed with suspicion or as a joke (or not even heard of at all)
 - E. **THE FIRST PLACE** that guardians are told to "search" for their lost dog or cat is typically **THE LAST PLACE** where a found dog or cat will be taken (i.e. the city pound). Compare this to lost/found people (central clearinghouse called "9-1-1").
 - F. Cats that are panicked, sick, or injured will hide in silence (behavior called "The Silence Factor") to protect themselves from predators. These cats will not be found by their guardians unless they physically search their neighbor's yards and/or utilize baited humane traps. The fact that these specific techniques are rarely taken contributes to low reclaim (and high euthanasia) rates of stray cats in our shelters.
- V. LOST PET BEHAVIORS
- A. The Lost Pet Triad - "Three inter-related behaviors present in every lost pet incident that directly influence whether or not a missing pet will be reunited with their guardian."
 1. The Behavior of the ANIMAL
 - a. Skittish dog vs. wiggly, friendly dog
 - b. Catatonic feral-behaving cat vs. Curious Clown cat
 2. The Behavior of the GUARDIAN
 - a. Strong HAB (human animal bond) vs. Weak HAB
 - b. Proper Search Tactics/Strategies vs. Improper
 3. The Behavior of the RESCUER
 - a. Assumption animal is feral or was dumped vs. "THINK LOST, NOT STRAY™"
 - b. Whoever had this dog/cat DOES NOT DESERVE IT (rush to re-home rather than reunite)
- VI. SHELTER MAR – Innovative Services That Save Lives!
- A. Physical searches for lost companion animals
 - B. Public Service platform (instead of animal welfare platform)
 1. Assistance is offered whether asked for or not
 2. Bend over backwards to help recover the lost pet (preventing it from entering the shelter)
 3. Offering help (even transportation if necessary) when needed
 - C. Ten Services (try just one – or try them all!)
 1. **Shelter Assistance Team** – Volunteers offer counseling, encouragement, and advice to every person who comes to the target shelter to report their pet missing. Every lost pet incident is assigned a case number and detailed records are maintained. Volunteers routinely search the shelter cages for dogs and cats reported lost. If a look alike animal is found (even weeks or months later),

volunteers call the pet owner and ask them to come down and see if the animal is their lost pet. In cases where the pet owner has a physical or financial hardship or is unable to come down to the shelter, volunteers act as a “Pet Detective Taxi” where they transport the pet owner to the shelter to reclaim their lost pet.

2. **Distant Shelter Check Team** – A large network of volunteers search their nearby shelters and rescue groups in their towns and report back if they find any “look alike” dogs and cats that match the description of the lost dogs and cats reported to the target shelter.
3. **Reverse Search Team** – Working in cooperation with animal control officers and shelter workers, volunteers make an aggressive effort to find the owners/guardians of stray dogs brought into the target shelter. Volunteers respond to the location where a stray dog was picked up and post a florescent FOUND DOG notice, conduct neighborhood interviews, and follow-up on leads in an attempt to find the rightful owners of impounded dogs who have only 72 hours to be claimed.
4. **Cold Case Team** – Volunteers maintain organized lost dog and cat binders that categorize all lost dogs and cats by breed and color. This would be for cases where owners agree to reclaim their dog or cat even if it takes months (or years) for our volunteers to find their lost pet. Three times a week, volunteers compare the binder photographs with the stray dogs and cats in the target shelter cages. If a potential match were found, they would contact the owner to come and see if the sheltered stray belongs to them.
5. **Intersection Alert Team** – We admit this sounds quirky, but this next technique has proven **highly** effective in recovering lost dogs! In some cases volunteers stand on street corners holding REWARD LOST DOG signs at key intersections in an effort to develop leads for lost dog investigations. Missing Pet Partnership believes that if war protestors and kids promoting car washes can stand at intersection with signs to promote their cause then pet owners who’ve lost a pet can use the same technique.
6. **Missing Cat Search Team** – Volunteer pet detectives (Missing Animal Response Technicians certified by Missing Pet Partnership) conduct physical searches for cats that have disappeared. The tactics used include utilizing high-tech detection equipment and a “cat detection” search dog trained to alert to the scent of a cat. The team conducts a systematic search of each missing cat’s territory, searching all areas of concealment and protection.
7. **Missing Dog Search Team** – Volunteer pet detectives (certified MAR Technicians) conduct aggressive physical searches for missing dogs using a scent-tracking/trailing dog as well as posting giant florescent posters along the route that the tracking dog worked the scent trail. Volunteers also conduct neighborhood check, interviewing neighbors and passing out flyers to see if they have seen the missing dog. (To view video of this type of search, go to www.missingpetpartnership.org and click on “New Video!”)

8. **Night Patrol Team** – Volunteers drive through residential neighborhoods at night (using a spotlight at times) to look for the “eye shine” of missing cats and roaming lost dogs. Research has shown that many stray dogs and cats who have skittish temperaments will hunker down and hide during the day but will come out at night. This technique of slowly driving through neighborhoods looking for eye shine was tested in Los Angeles and proved to be very successful in recovering several missing cats who were found just a few blocks from their home.
9. **Trap-and-Reunite (TAR) Team** – Working at night, volunteers use surveillance techniques (night vision, baby monitor, surveillance camera, digital wildlife cameras) to stake out and watch feeding stations or baited humane traps to capture panicked cats that have escaped and are hiding nearby or panicked dogs who are avoiding human contact. This technique is known as Trap-and-Reunite (TAR) and has proven to be a highly effective method for recovering displaced, skittish cats that otherwise are typically absorbed into the feral cat population and/or end up in shelters months later, long after their owner have stopped searching.
10. **Follow-Up Team** – This team researches both lost and found notices on Internet lost pet sites, Craig’s List, area rescue groups, Pet Finders, local newspapers, and follow-ups on posted LOST DOG and LOST CAT posters found by MPP volunteers.

D. Washington Humane Society – Missing Pet Partnership / Pilot project announcement!

VII. CONCLUSION

What would happen if shelters referred guardians to reliable lost pet recovery services? What would happen if shelters developed a program where volunteers did everything within their power to find the guardians of stray dogs and cats within the 72-hour holding period? What if instead of passively waiting for someone to show up, volunteers went into the community *and looked for* the rightful guardians?

How much would shelter euthanasia levels drop and how high would return-to-owner rates soar if aggressive efforts were put into returning “stray” dogs and cats to the families from which they first escaped? What would happen if shelters helped people SEARCH for their lost pets? THEY WOULD FIND THEM!!

Think Lost, Not Stray!™

The phrase "THINK LOST, NOT STRAY™" was developed by **Missing Pet Partnership** as means to send out a new message designed to reunite more lost dogs and cats with the families who love them. Our message to the animal welfare industry and citizen rescuers is this: Many of the "stray dogs" and "feral cats" that come into your care are actually lost pets with families who would do anything to get their companion animal back home. Before you work to give a found dog or found cat a new home, THINK LOST, NOT STRAY!™

HOW MESSAGES INFLUENCE OUR BEHAVIOR: The messages that we hear through marketing, advertising, and other sources influence our thought processes and, ultimately, how we behave. According to Malcolm Gladwell, author of *BLINK: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, a good portion of our decision making comes from an unconscious level. Gladwell says that we make unconscious "implicit associations" that influence our decision making process and, ultimately, our behavior. These implicit associations, which typically lead to snap judgments, are the opinions we've developed based on the things we've previously seen or heard.

According to Gladwell's research, people "make connections much more quickly between pairs of ideas that are already related in our minds than we do between pairs of ideas that are unfamiliar to us." He went on to write that, "The giant computer that is our unconscious silently crunches all the data it can from the experiences we've had, the people we've met, the lessons we've learned, the books we've read, the movies we've seen, and so on, and it forms an opinion." THE "HOMELESS" MESSAGE: Some of the primary messages the animal welfare industry have sent out in the past years have promoted the words "homeless," "abandoned," "dumped," and "feral." People (usually private citizens) who have heard messages that millions of "homeless" animals are "abandoned" and "dumped" every year tend to leap to the conclusion that the dog they find wandering along a road was "dumped" and is "homeless" rather than considering that it could be a beloved lost pet.

Someone who believes that a dog was dumped is more likely to self-adopt that dog rather than attempt to find its' owner. Are some dogs dumped? Yes! Are most of the loose dogs running around in our neighborhoods there because they were dumped? *NO!* In order for most of the loose (found) dogs to be unwanted (dumped or abandoned), we'd need to have hoards of people lining up every day just to dump all of these dogs! How likely is that? In reality, we have many people showing up at our animal shelters every day to report that their dog escaped and is lost. The number of loose (found) dogs that end up in shelters, rescue groups, or that are self-adopted is comparably less, compared with the number of people who "dump" or "abandon" dogs and more comparable to the number of lost dogs that are never found by their families.

THE "ABUSED" MESSAGE: A secondary message that the animal welfare industry has sent out in the past years is that many dogs and cats are "abused." Are dogs and cats routinely neglected and physically abused by a sick segment of our population? While the answer, unfortunately, happens to be yes, these sick people are actually a rather small segment of the entire pet owning population. More importantly, the physical appearance and the behavior of a found dog or cat is *not* the best indicator of whether or not an animal was abused! A dog that is thin, has cuts, burs, fleas, ticks, and is limping may appear this way because it has been running loose for two weeks. A cat that is thin, emaciated, and full of fleas might appear this way because they have been hiding in fear for six weeks under a neighbor's deck after escaping from their owner's home.

Many dogs and cats are at risk of permanent separation from their families simply because their appearance and their behaviors are misinterpreted as "abuse." The two groups of companion animals that are at the highest risk of permanent displacement are dogs and cats with xenophobic (fearful, skittish) temperaments.

THE XENOPHOBIC DOG: Xenophobia means "fear or hatred of things strange or foreign". Dogs with xenophobic temperaments (due to genetics and/or puppy hood experiences) are more inclined to travel

farther and are at a higher risk of being hit by cars. Due to their cowering, fearful behavior, people assume these dogs were "abused", and even if the dog has ID tags, they will refuse to contact the previous owner. Some of these panic-stricken dogs will even run from their owners! People who find xenophobic dogs often misinterpret the dog's behavior: they assume that the cowering, fearful dog was "abused" when in fact the dog has a fearful temperament and has been shy and fearful since it was a puppy.

Dogs found in rural areas are often assumed to be "dumped" and/or homeless; many rescuers never think this could be a dog that was lost. Some people who find a stray dog that does not have a collar automatically assume it is "homeless" and therefore they immediately work to place the dog rather than attempt to find the dog's owner.

THE XENOPHOBIC CAT: One of the most tragic misinterpretations of feline behavior occurs when rescuers observe a cat with a xenophobic temperament and assume, based on the fearful behavior, that the cat is an untamed "feral." Xenophobic cats are afraid of EVERYTHING that is new or unfamiliar. Their fearful behavior is hardwired into their character; it is caused by genetics and/or kitten hood experiences (nature or nurture). These cats will hide when a stranger comes into their home, and they typically will not come out until well after the company has left. They do not do well with human contact (being held, petted, etc.) and they are easily disturbed by any change in their environment. When displaced, they bolt and then HIDE IN SILENCE. They tend to remain in the same hiding place and become almost catatonic, immobilized with fear.

If they are found by someone other than their owners, they are typically mistaken as being untamed or "feral cat." While it is true that feral, untamed cats who are unaccustomed to human contact will hiss, spit, twirl, lunge, and urinate when humanely trapped, this "wild animal" behavior is also common in cats who have xenophobic temperaments! We know this because we've talked to owners of lost, xenophobic cats that had to be humanely trapped in order to be recovered; the owners verified that their cats exhibited wild behavior while in the humane trap. These "wild" and "aggressive" behaviors are a reflection of a cat with a fearful TEMPERAMENT, not a lack of TAMENESS.

WHY WE SEND THIS MESSAGE: Every year, millions of dogs and cats escape from their homes and are never reunited with their rightful owners. The entire burden of finding and recovering a displaced dog or cat rests solely on the shoulders of the owner, who, in most cases, is not trained in how or where to search. They are not equipped with or trained in how to use animal capturing tools like catchpoles, snappy snares, and humane traps. We offer every imaginable service under the sun for our companion animals but when they become separated from the families who love them, we leave it up to grieving people who are discouraged, overwhelmed, and usually working alone.

With everything working against them, people who lose their beloved dogs and cats need all the help they can get in order to achieve a successful reunion. Lost dogs and cats that are not returned to their families take up valuable space in our animal shelters, no-kill shelters, rescue groups, and feral cat colonies. So, the next time that you find a loose dog or an unattended cat, assume that someone loves and is looking for that particular companion animal. Ideally, you should post a FOUND poster in the area where the animal was found, place a FOUND Ad in the paper, have the animal scanned for a microchip, and report the animal as found to your local shelter (or transport it to the shelter where the owner can find it, but place a hold on it so you can adopt it if the animal is not claimed). With your support, Missing Pet Partnership can put out the message that STRAY DOG MAY MEAN LOST DOG and STRAY CAT MAY MEAN LOST CAT. By doing this, we know that rescuer behaviors will change and more found dogs and found cats will be reunited with the families who love and are searching them!

LOST PET / LOST PERSON COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: How We Look for Lost People vs. Lost Pets

By Kat Albrecht
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1. **LOST PEOPLE:** Central clearinghouse consistent across nation (9-1-1)
LOST PETS: There is no central clearinghouse -- there are massive locations where a found (stray) could end up (local pound, humane society, rescue group facilities, volunteer homes of rescue groups, self-adopted by independent rescuer, etc.).
2. **LOST PEOPLE:** Typically the family receives sympathy and support (especially in child abduction or high-profile cases)
LOST PETS: Typically pet owner experience "disenfranchised grief" (grief that is publicly unacceptable) where they are shunned by friends, co-workers and family who have a weak (or non-existent) human-animal bond and who tell the pet owner to "just get over it," "you'll never find your dog," "it was just a cat" or "just go to the pound and get another one."
3. **LOST PEOPLE:** Typically the family is not openly blamed, even if accident resulted in death of a child.
LOST PETS: Typically, the pet owner is blamed and considered "irresponsible" for their dog or cat running loose, even if it was a clear accident beyond their control.
4. **LOST PEOPLE:** When a lost child is found, rescuers do not consider keeping it and in most cases, it is not turned over to child protective services so that "a better family" can be found.
LOST PETS: When a lost dog is found, it is quite common for the rescuer to self-adopt the dog or turn it over to an organization that will find the dog a new home (without ever attempting to return the dog to the original owner).
5. **LOST PEOPLE:** When a child is lost, trained resources will respond immediately to the location, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
LOST PETS: When a pet is lost, there is no one to call, no one to respond to assist in the search efforts—you can call a pet sitter, mobile veterinarian, and even a dog poop scoop company to come to your house but when your pet is lost, sorry, you are on your own.
6. **LOST PEOPLE:** The burden is on the police agency to take action, not on the family member (to find their lost family member).
LOST PETS: Burden is on the pet owner to take action to find their lost pet—and relying on people who are untrained in lost pet behavior or in the differences of how to search for a missing dog vs. a missing cat is a major contributing factor to the homeless pet population.
7. **LOST PEOPLE:** Assistance offered whether it is asked for or not!
LOST PETS: Assistance is typically refused (by animal shelters, the local police, even TNR and rescue groups) when a pet owner calls and asks someone to come out and help them search for their missing pets...even when pet owner pleads for it!
8. **LOST PEOPLE:** In many cities across the USA there are three levels of services available: (a) law enforcement officers conduct an investigation (b) volunteer search-and-rescue teams are deployed to assist in the search (c) outside nonprofits are used to supplement investigation (Polly Klaas Foundation, Child Quest, etc.).
LOST PETS: Pet owners are very lucky if they can even find a pet detective in their area, let alone afford the current fees charged for their services.
9. **LOST PEOPLE:** Research has been conducted to analyze lost person behavior and search managers use the data from that research to strategically deploy the proper resources during search-and-rescue operations.
LOST PETS: No research has been conducted on the behavioral patterns of missing dogs and cats (even though the data is readily available)

LOST PET / LOST PERSON COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: (CONTINUED)

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10. **LOST PEOPLE:** Search-and-rescue managers use principles like "Search Probability Theory" and "Deductive Reasoning" to develop conclusions on how and where to search for lost people.
LOST PETS: Reasoning is seldom used when searching for lost pets -- untrained pet owners instead are following gut instincts and using NO reasoning (when they should use deductive reasoning!) and they do everything from stapling dirty underwear to trees to leaving "a scent trail for their pet to follow" and other acts of desperation
11. **LOST PEOPLE:** National nonprofit exists exclusively for purpose of missing children education and assistance (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, founded by John Walsh).
LOST PETS: Before Missing Pet Partnership was developed, no nonprofit existed exclusively for purpose of missing pet education or in helping to develop community-based lost pet services.
12. **LOST PEOPLE:** System in place and aggressive attempts will be made to positively identify people--even DEAD people (dental records, finger prints, driver's license, social security card, tattoo records, etc.)
LOST PETS: Microchip systems are in place that could be used to positively identify pets but is only used by a small fraction of pet owners.
13. **LOST PEOPLE:** The problem of "Homeless" people is not being addressed through aggressive birth control education or adoption events for unwanted babies. There are many reasons why people become homeless (depression, mental illness, drug or alcohol addictions, loss of income, tragedy, etc.) and services have been developed to deal with each of these issues that contribute to the problem of humans who are homeless.
LOST PETS: The problem of "Homeless Pets" is primarily being addressed through aggressive spay/neuter education or adoption events for unwanted dogs and cats. However, there are many reasons why dogs and cats become homeless, including lost and displaced pets that are never found.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Lost pets not found are a *major contributing factor* to the number of companion animals killed in our shelters and to growing feral cat populations. If every single dog and cat that escaped from their home were found by someone who immediately took it to the local shelter, kill rates would be off the charts! Shelters simply *could not house* the number of companion animals that, on a daily basis, are lost and subsequently found by other people. So *why* aren't we helping people search for their lost pets? Instead, we maintain cats in feral cat colonies and develop a plethora of rescue groups and foster homes to handle to load of all these "stray" animals. Most of them were not born in the wild—they came from somewhere, meaning they escaped from a guardian!

Attacking the pet overpopulation problem by strictly focusing on spay/neuter issues and adoptions (rushing to re-home rather than efforts to reunite) ignores one of the primary root causes of strays that end up in our shelters—lost dogs and cats that were never recovered. The result of ignoring the lost pet problem has been a drastically low "return to owner rate" of lost pets as well as a pet overpopulation problem that is out-of-control. It's time for a change!