

Inside U.S.

Animal Control Shelters

“The fact that an opinion has been widely held is is no evidence that it is not utterly absurd.”

Bertrand Russell

We are a nation of cat and dog lovers. But the shelters we expect to provide these animals with a second chance are instead killing five million of them every year. And for far too long, we have been told that the killing is exclusively the public's fault. That shelters—through no fault of their own—are merely performing the public's dirty work—with skill, compassion, and dedication. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In this issue of *No Kill Sheltering*, we take you on a visual tour of animal control shelters in the United States. As you will discover, these pictures demonstrate a reality very much at odds with the image most people have of animal shelters. Most people believe that animal shelters are taking in the animals that people throw away, and that shelter leadership and their staff are finding homes for those they can, and gently and humanely “euthanizing” the rest because there is no other choice. Most people believe that if there were alternatives, shelters would not kill because shelters are staffed with benevolent animal lovers trying their best against overwhelming odds and offering a humane death only when necessary. Because we could not do it, we assume they do it because they have no choice. As a result, the overwhelming emotion many people have toward shelter directors and their staff is empathy: “How can they do it?” we ask, generally not as criticism, but often as thanks.

This is a point of view such agencies and their large national allies such as Humane Society of the United States, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), and the

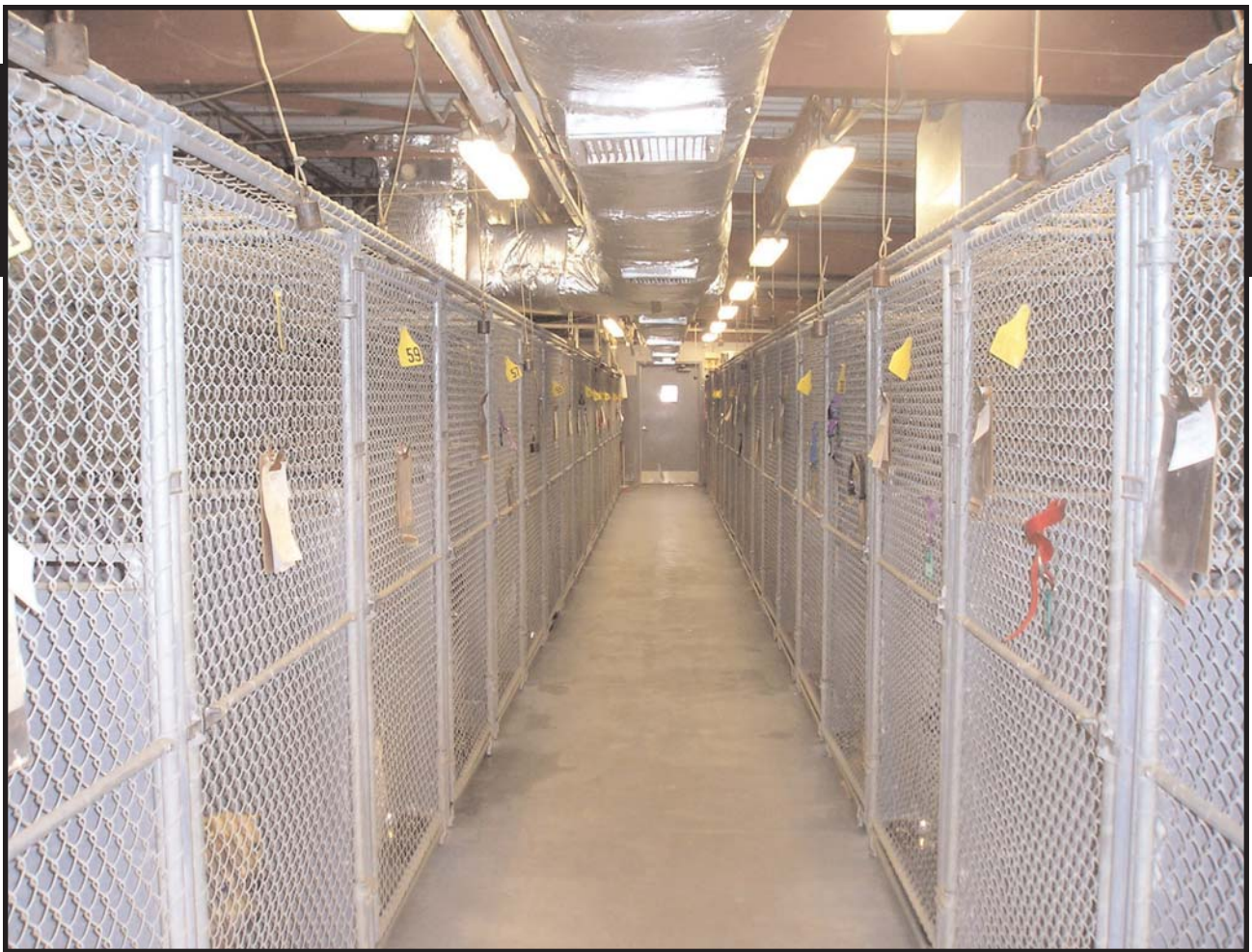
National Animal Control Director's Association would like animal lovers and the public at large to believe. Accordingly, they claim that leadership and staff at every one of these agencies “have a passion for and are dedicated to the mutual goal of saving animals' lives.” (Asilomar Accords, 2004.)

It is this portrayal that silences criticism of shelters, the vast majority of which, in reality, have a paltry number of adoptions and staggeringly high rates of killing. The public—particularly activists fighting to better the plight of animals in society—is told that “we are all on the same side,” “we all want the same thing,” “we are all animal lovers,” and that any criticism of shelters and their staff is unfair, and callous because “no one wants to kill.” That is why a large national agency can boldly proclaim, without the slightest hint of sarcasm or irony, as a caption below a picture of a puppy—a young, healthy, perfectly adoptable puppy—being put to death, that “This dog was one of the lucky ones who died in a humane shelter... Here caring shelter workers administer a fatal injection...”

While these groups tell us time and again that our nation's animal shelters are staffed by caring and compassionate animal lovers who hate to kill and would do anything in their power to protect animals and save their lives—the facts, tragically and frequently, tell a very different story.

Bureaucratic Indifference

Since many of the agencies contracting to perform animal control come with the label “humane society” or “Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA),” the assumption is that these shelters are in



fact operating humanely and staffed by directors and employees with a passion for animal protection. In reality, while many of these agencies may have initially been founded by people with enormous compassion and dedication to animal welfare, this focus was lost over time as many of these organizations took over the “pound contracts” from the cities and towns in which they reside. As a result, killing became the central strategy for these agencies, and working in an animal control shelter became a “job” not a “mission.” In fact, the only qualification these agencies look for in hiring their directors is not a passion for and past lifesaving success; it is simply experience running other animal control shelters. The fact that the previous shelter killed the vast majority of the animals under a director’s tenure does not stop him or her from getting other animal control jobs. The most important question “how successful were you at saving lives?” is never even asked. Not surprisingly, while many of these organizations became very large and influential, they also became bureaucratic, with none of the zeal for reform that characterized the movement’s early founders.

In some communities, animal control shelters are placed under the rubric of health departments. These shelters are not focused on saving lives, but tend to focus primarily, if not exclusively, on “public health.” Too often, they take an overly broad view of “public health” that says all animals are potential disease threats. Other times, these agencies are placed under the umbrella of police departments. These agencies relegate lifesaving to the sidelines as they tend to focus primarily, if not exclusively, on “public safety.” A stray dog is not an animal who needs to be rescued and placed in a home so much as she is a potential threat of a bite who must be removed. And, tragically, some agencies are placed under the control of sanitation departments. What does this say about a government’s commitment and view of animal sheltering and the priorities of the bureaucrats who oversee and staff these facilities? In fact, it shows that the county considers strays to be akin to “trash” which must be “picked up” and taken “away.” And staff at these agencies often do just that. In fact, it is not uncommon for shelter directors to say “our primary focus is public health,” “rabies prevention,” or “public safety.”

The No Kill Alternative

That is not to say that all shelters are geared to overkill, that all shelter directors lack compassion, and that all shelter workers shirk their responsibilities to the animals they should be pledged to protect. That view is as ludicrous as the opposite view that they all care, would stop at nothing to save lives if it held out even a promise of an alternative to killing. But one fact is undeniable. Almost all public animal control shelters are not doing enough to save lives. Most public animal control shelters—the vast majority of them—are not run efficiently, effectively, or in a manner than maximizes lifesaving. The numbers killed—a staggering five million dogs and cats, and hundreds of thousands of other animals—every year confirm that. As does one other basic truth: what has happened in many of these shelters when their long time directors were replaced with outsiders dedicated to saving lives.

At shelters in Tompkins County (NY), Charlottesville (VA), at the Nevada Humane Society in Washoe County (NV), shelters with a history of poor animal care, dirty facilities, and rampant killing became transformed virtually overnight when they replaced their long-term directors with animal lovers dedicated to lifesaving. Where there was little more than killing, these communities are now saving over 90% of all the animals, reserving killing to the hopelessly ill or injured, and truly vicious dogs. As one such agency tells it:

Ever creative and resourceful, we find ways to tap the pet needs of a compassionate community and match all of our animals with the right adopters in due course. And while pets reside in [our shelter], they live in an environment as close to residential living as possible, not in cages. They enjoy a great measure of socializing, exercise, premium ... foods, and the best medical care available. And thanks to our award-winning team of volunteer foster families, shelter capacity can be stretched by sending our animals to temporary homes until it's their turn to find their forever home.

As the incredible and often immediate lifesaving results reaped by shelter directors who have embraced the No Kill philosophy and its programs and services over the last decade have demonstrated, we know how to end the killing of homeless animals. The same programs and services have

Empty Cages

Shelters kill every day in the U.S. despite empty cages. Empty cages mean less cleaning, less work, less effort for shelter staff. Many shelters, such as those pictured below, keep most of the cat cages empty during the height of the busy summer season despite falsely claiming that they have no choice but to kill cats “for space.”



Left: In a Louisiana shelter, only one cat was available for adoption despite empty cages and taking in nearly 4,000 per year. Over 90% were put to death.

In a Los Angeles city shelter, a veterinarian who ordered all cages kept full was fired because of staff complaints of too much work.

Right: In an Oregon shelter only six out of fifty cages had cats in them. Meanwhile, the morgue was filled with furry bodies.



resulted in success in every community in which they have been implemented comprehensively and with integrity. Unfortunately, few communities have done so, and most lack the political will to implement them. This is because most animal control directors are content not to and animal advocates who should be demanding the resignation of these directors are, for the most part, failing to do so. And this failure has at its core misperceptions about both the reasons animals are being killed in shelters, and the motivation of the people who are doing that killing. It is the entirely false notion that most shelter directors and their staff share the same goals and values as animal advocates in the community which stifles criticism and, as a result, prevents true reform.

Full Body Bags



Above: The morgue in a Pennsylvania shelter. After being killed, animals are wrapped in trash bags before being sent to the landfill. A former manager stated that, "During euthanasia I witnessed little care toward the animals. Considering this was to be the last contact the animal would have with the real world I found this rather disappointing."

Right: A dog near comatose with labored breathing in the "morgue" area was slowly dying because staff was poorly trained in killing techniques. Lax practices have resulted in live animals being placed in trash bags and taken to the morgue area after supposedly being killed.



The Buck Stops Here

Why are some shelters still killing in the face of alternatives, while other shelters are saving the vast majority of animals? One common excuse is that the shelters with higher rates of lifesaving are somehow "unique" compared to those with high rates of killing. But this excuse ignores the fact that each community that has experienced some measure of success was as bad as those which continue on their path of killing. And it ignores the fact that the communities had no distinguishing characteristics from those which continue to rely on killing when their new directors who embraced the No Kill philosophy took over.

When San Francisco achieved success by saving all healthy dogs and cats city and countywide in the mid-1990s, shelter directors and large national organizations across the country complacent with the status quo and threatened by emerging No Kill success said it could only be done in an urban community, not a rural one because of what they claimed were antiquated views of animals and poverty. When No Kill was achieved in rural Tompkins County, NY at an open door animal control shelter (93% save rate), they said it could not be done in the South for similar reasons. When it was achieved in the South in Charlottesville, VA at an open door animal control shelter (92% save rate), they said it could not be done in developing communities that are

seeing tremendous population growth and urban sprawl because of the influx of new people and animals. The developing success in Reno, Nevada—one of the fastest growing counties in Nevada—disproves that, too. That is why the question of public vs. private shelter, urban vs. rural, or South vs. North is not relevant. The only relevant inquiry is whether the shelters are staffed by truly compassionate staff who are working tirelessly to rigorously implement the programs and services that save lives.

Why does one shelter send thousands of animals every year into foster care to help save lives, while the vast majority do not? Indeed, one such shelter even fired volunteers who took motherless kittens home and bottle-fed them around the clock until they were old enough to eat on their own and be adopted. Why does one shelter open its doors to rescue groups, while the vast majority kill animals these groups are willing to save? Why does one shelter neuter and release feral cats, while the vast majority of others not only oppose such efforts, but some even send officers out to write citations to those who do?

The answer is simple: the single most important factor which determines whether shelters succeed or fail at saving lives is the person who runs the animal control and/or large private shelter in a community, and whether they are committed to lifesaving and therefore implement the needed lifesaving programs, while holding their staff

accountable to results. In other words, the difference between shelters which are saving the vast majority of animals in their care compared to those which are killing comes down to the choices made by the people who are running them. And when it comes to the shelters whose directors are killing large numbers of animals, those choices and priorities manifest themselves not only in their appalling kill rates, but also in their poor and oftentimes cruel treatment the animals in their facilities must endure.

In-Humane Societies

In the last three years, for example, we have visited approximately fifty shelters nationwide. This is a small—and representative—sampling of what we found:

- In a Georgia shelter, a dog with a bloody club foot (missing all toes) was brought in by a field officer who did not tell anybody and since the shelter relied on prison labor and did not discipline underperforming employees, no one came forward to provide care. As a result, the dog languished injured—and in pain—for several days. In the same shelter, staff surreptitiously poisoned cats in retaliation for volunteers coming forward to expose staff under-performance and over-kill. Two weeks prior, cats froze to death in their outdoor “pen” due to freezing temperatures at night.
- In a Maryland shelter, filthy conditions included animals standing in their own waste. A dog with a broken leg was allowed to languish with no medical care for five days until killed. And dogs were sprayed down with high pressure hoses and caustic chemicals because staff did



We are a nation of cat lovers. The cat is the most popular pet in America, with about 90 million of them sharing our homes. The vast majority entering shelters will be killed, however, many without ever being offered for adoption. Here, a filthy litter box—one hour after the cage was supposedly “cleaned.”

not want to remove the dogs from the kennels before cleaning them.

- In a Louisiana shelter, there was only one cat available for adoption despite taking in about 4,000 per year.

During the first ten months of the year, shelter staff killed 3,171 of the 3,442 cats they took in. Dogs fared just as poorly. Of the 6,836 dogs the shelter took in during the first ten months of the year, its staff put 5,394 to death. During our visit, however, most of the cages were intentionally left empty despite shelter staff claims that they have to kill “for space.” One room, for example, had 14 cage kennels available, but only three had animals. In another room, there were 12 cage kennels, but only five had dogs in them. And the room for puppies had 12 cages, eight of which were left empty.

- In a Missouri shelter, the facility had an overwhelming smell that made it difficult, if not unhealthy to breath. Although run by the health department, cockroaches scurried across the floor in several rooms, flies were everywhere, and animals were forced to stand in their own waste. Meanwhile, filthy conditions lead to epidemics of respiratory infections. The shelter then claimed it had “no choice” but to kill the cats “because they are sick.”

- In an Oregon shelter, staff kept only six cats available for adoption in a room with nearly 50 cages in order to work less (less cats meant less cleaning). This occurred in July, during the height of the busy summer season when every cage can and should have been full. Instead, the shelter killed 1,202 of the 1,711 cats it took in, claiming to kill many “for space.”

These are not examples of a bygone era. All of them occurred between 2004 and 2007 at shelters which claimed to be committed to lifesaving. One of these shelters killed approximately 22,000 of the 25,000 dogs and cats it took in one year. It was even killing “for space” on a day it had over seventy empty cages because it was quicker and easier to kill the animals than to clean their cages. Despite this, two large national animal welfare organizations said that this particular shelter’s deplorable levels of killing were within the “norms” of U.S. shelters. What progressive animal advocates in that community called a “slaughterhouse,” national animal welfare organizations called “norms.”



At some shelters, staff cut corners by cleaning dog kennels with high pressure hoses and caustic chemicals while leaving the dogs in the run, instead of removing them as they should. The dogs either become sick or become fearful of people and then are killed as “unadoptable.” Here, dogs are wet and shivering after being sprayed with water and chemicals.

With such a low threshold of expectations, is it any wonder that we have accepted the notion that the best we can do for homeless animals is to adopt a few and kill the rest? Is it any wonder that national groups have been able to fool the public into believing that killing is done at the hands of caring shelter workers who would do everything in their power, leave no stone

Puppies huddled in the corner of a filthy cage caked with diarrhea. Once “cleaned,” cages at this shelter are not re-cleaned, forcing these puppies to languish for the rest of the day in their own waste. This shelter’s poor care results in epidemics of highly virulent diseases like parvovirus—a death sentence for these and other puppies.



untended, implement any program that had a glimmer of hope, if it held a promise of something different?

Some of the photographs in this issue are less graphic than others, yet the truth they subtly reveal is equally insidious. They are pictures of empty cages—intentionally kept empty to avoid having to clean them, resulting in unnecessary killing. There is a picture of a cat sitting on a cat tree waiting for adoption—the one and only cat a shelter made available for adoption, while it killed the rest. There is also one of a cat cuddling someone’s hand, a friendly orange tabby, who would ultimately be killed for being “vicious” because killing a vicious cat, even if undeniably false, is more palatable to the public than killing a nice one, particularly on a day the shelter had so many empty cat cages.

Almost all of the photographs in this issue were taken at shelters which knew we were coming for an inspection, and “cleaned up” the shelter in anticipation of our arrival. These are shelters operating under public scrutiny at what they consider to be their personal and professional best. Given that, the state of what we found is all

the more shocking and outrageous. As is the inevitable conclusion: shelters kill because it is easier to kill than it is to hold staff accountable, to implement needed programs, and to get results. Shelters kill because incompetence, uncaring, neglect, and sometimes outright cruelty to animals are, unfortunately, endemic and epidemic in our nation’s animal control shelters.

With Friends Like These

But few in the animal protection movement are willing to recognize this reality, or to state such facts publicly; while those who do are labeled as “divisive.” Indeed, it is a common notion in the animal protection movement that if we could all set our differences aside and “get along,” we would better serve the animals. But how can this be so when there are those staffing humane societies and shelters who hold positions which are the anti-thesis of the very goals—saving lives, doing no harm, and advancing the rights of animals to be free of suffering and to live—that the animal protection movement exists to promote? Why should we remain silent and complacent about their failures simply because they claim to be part of our movement and to care about animals, even when their actions

The outdoor pen at a Georgia shelter. At this filthy shelter, cats get sick from the inevitable respiratory infections associated with these conditions. Meanwhile, to save money the shelter uses prison labor, while paid staff socialize up front. Several cats froze to death due to extreme cold weather in the evening, and two weeks after animal activists went public with complaints of staff neglect, shelter cats began dying. Necropsies determined the cause of death to be poisoning. Only staff have access to these facilities.





A Pennsylvania shelter regularly stacked cats in blue crates with their paperwork. It was not uncommon at this shelter for cats to sit in these crates with no food or water for up to eight hours, the urine and defecation from the cats above falling on those below.

are morally bound to speak up. Now that we know the key to ending the killing, the time has come when our silence is betrayal. The animal protection movement must acknowledge that animals in shelters are entitled to equal compassion, equal consideration, and equal rights that it advocates for other animal species. And that will only occur when we speak up loudly and clearly in defense of animals in shelters, and soundly reject the viewpoints within our movement which have

reveal opposing values and priorities? Movement unity and cohesion do not—and should not—supersede our duty to animals and the goals we seek on their behalf. While it is always more difficult and uncomfortable to stand up to one’s so-called “friends” than it is to stand up to one’s “enemies,” stand up we must. For if we are ever to achieve a No Kill nation—and end the wholly unnecessary killing of millions of animals every year in U.S. shelters—then our actions must be strategic responses to the actual problems that cause animal suffering and prevent greater lifesaving, and not phantoms of our wishful thinking. And the biggest impediment to No Kill, as the photographs and information in this issue demonstrate, is a failure of caring and an eschewal of their duties to animals by a great many of those who currently staff our nation’s animal control shelters. Nationwide lifesaving success will only be achieved when all shelters and all animal protection groups fully embrace the No Kill paradigm which says that the killing of cats and dogs in our nation’s shelters must end—and not when we “respect” opposing views that accept and legitimize the killing. To the extent that shelter bureaucrats and their large national allies oppose the No Kill philosophy, animals will continue to needlessly die. To the extent that animals continue to die needlessly, we

historically stood in the way of No Kill’s widespread implementation.



In Texas, this tiny kitten sat in a trap in a back room without water all day, while staff socialized in front. The kitten was killed as a “feral cat” because a person brought him in this trap. Many cats act fearful in traps—and are thus labeled “feral” when they are not. Shelter staff did not put the cat in a cage and give him time to calm down nor did they perform any type of evaluation. Even if he was feral, he could have been tamed by volunteers, sent to a rescue group, or neutered and returned to his habitat. Instead, after sitting in the trap most of the day, he was injected in the stomach with poison from a bottle marked “fatal plus.” His tiny body was then thrown in an incinerator.

Time for Change

It has been over a decade since communities with compassionate animal directors have achieved success at saving lives. Most shelter directors have chosen to ignore that success, while digging in their heels and disparaging the No Kill philosophy. In others, they have responded to public pressure by putting forth bold claims and promising success in five years in order to silence their critics, yet failing to implement the programs to make such promises a reality, while the business of killing in their shelters continues as usual.

Animal control directors have already had more than enough time to embrace No Kill and make it a reality. And yet No Kill exists in only a handful of communities. The energy and resources to achieve success have instead been squandered on fighting and denigrating it. The time has come for animal advocates to reclaim these organizations.

Consequently, the most important single act—and the crucial first step—in achieving a No Kill nation is regime change. We must insist on it. It is time to demand the resignation of those

shelter directors who have refused to embrace the No Kill philosophy and to follow through by comprehensively implementing the programs and services which save lives. Because ultimately, these shelters are doing what they are doing in our name: they are doing it with our taxes, with our donations, as

agencies representing us, and they are even blaming us (and our neighbors) for doing it by claiming they have no choice because of the public's irresponsibility. And although we are picking up the tab, we are not paying the ultimate price. That is being paid by the animals who are unfortunate enough to enter U.S. shelters and lose their lives as a result. And it will not end until we put the blame directly where it belongs: on the shelters themselves. On the very staff and administrators who fail every time they inject an animal with an



Do you want to adopt a cat? A Louisiana shelter takes in 4,000 per year but only has one available for adoption. This is him. He wasn't "one of the lucky ones." He was the *only* lucky one. Was he adopted? We can't say for sure. Whether he too was killed after we left is anyone's guess. But with over 90 percent of cats being killed by this shelter, his odds aren't good.

overdose of barbiturates in the face of lifesaving alternatives like foster care, offsite adoptions, working

A cat declared "aggressive" and scheduled for destruction as "unadoptable" by untrained shelter staff. The same cat cuddling up to someone. By claiming the cat was "unadoptable," this shelter could publicly claim it had no choice but to kill this cat.



Despite a state law which requires fresh water, dogs are forced to drink green colored, algae-covered water at this California shelter. California law also requires dogs in shelters to be given proper exercise, but this shelter has essentially argued that walking dogs to the “euthanasia” room or to be seen by potential adopters is enough. There is mounting evidence that it is violating state law in many other respects as well.



Saving lives requires a shelter to keep animals healthy. In order to keep animals healthy, shelters must be kept clean and as free from pathogens as possible. When animals get sick, most shelters kill them claiming they have no choice but to do so. While even this is not true (animals can be treated either in the shelter, sent to rescue groups, or cared for by volunteer foster parents), it is often the very practices of shelters which make animals sick. While there will always be individual cases of disease in shelters, epidemics are almost always the result of shoddy cleaning practices and lax care. Here, the water used to “clean” the floors went unchanged for days, spreading disease. Filthy conditions were the norm because staff claimed they didn’t have time to clean, despite spending an inordinate amount of time socializing.

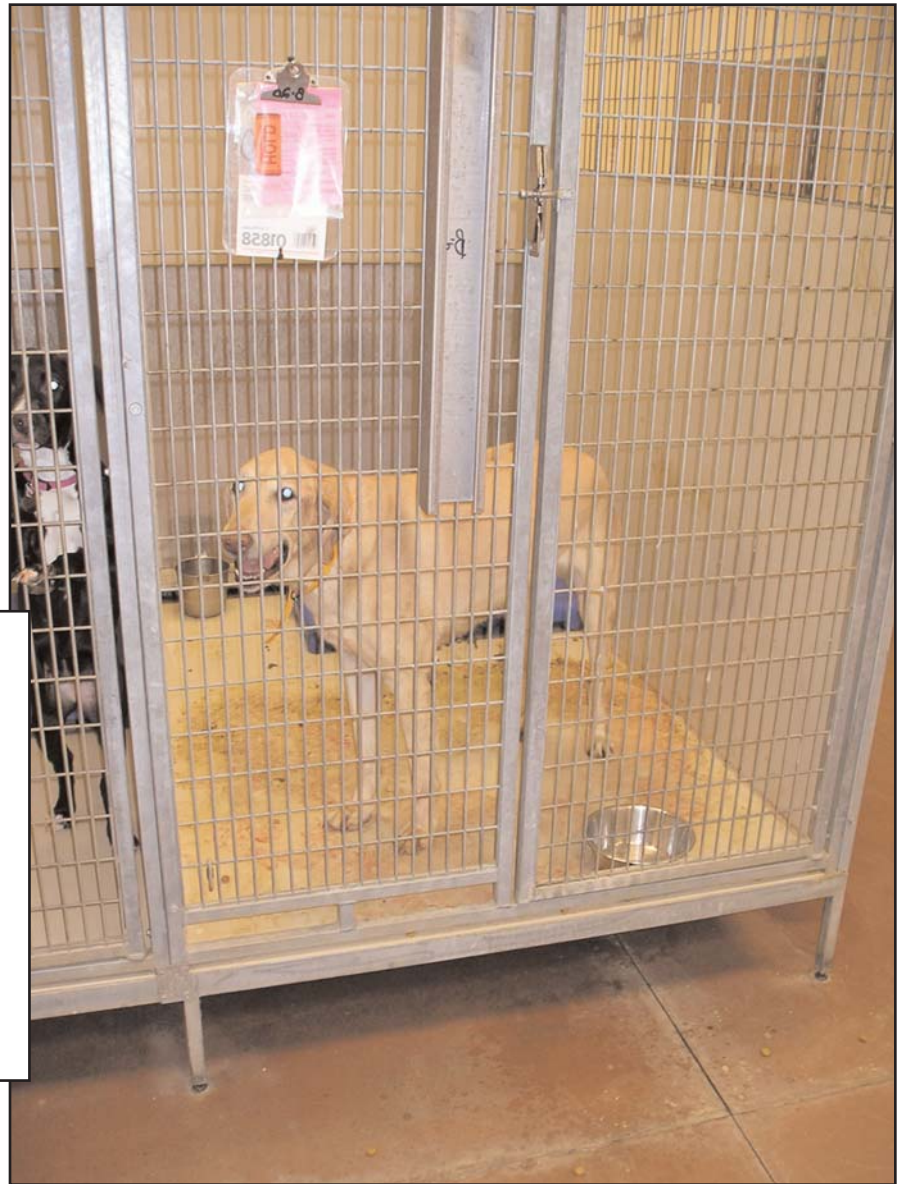


A commitment to the animals is evidenced by the state of order or chaos in a shelter. Here, the animals’ food is carelessly dumped in the room where animals are killed (the gas chamber can be seen on the left) right next to cat litter and a barrel of caustic cleaning chemicals (in the blue barrel).



with rescue groups, or non-lethal programs of neuter and release for feral cats.

Imagine this: if every shelter did as well as communities who have embraced No Kill, we would save 4.1 million of the five million dogs and cats who are scheduled to be killed in U.S. shelters this year. It is not an impossible dream. For, at the end of the day, the power to change the status quo is in our hands.



In this Pennsylvania shelter, a dog with bloody diarrhea sits in his filthy cage while shelter managers and staff periodically walk by but make no effort to clean it up. The dog was not treated and records show he was ultimately killed after languishing in this condition for several days.



In this California shelter, blood stains the cage of a puppy beaten by a shelter employee. According to published reports, “This dog... had numerous lacerations, on both sides of his body, his neck, shoulders and chest and rear. He limped for several days. ... The dent on his head that resulted from the baton beating ... can still be seen 10 days later... Piles of blood poured on every wall, on the bars on both sides, on the ceiling and on the floor of cage

88 where the beating took place.” The officer who beat the puppy with the baton was not fired. (CA photographs/text courtesy of nokillnow.com.)

