



The No Kill Advocate

E-Newsletter

Special Edition

The in-Humane Society

On October 27, 1990, reporters from all across the nation converged in a small room at the little known Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo, California. While cameras clicked and onlookers gasped, the shelter's director took a tan-and-gray calico cat and her four tiger-striped kittens and injected them in the stomach with poison from a bottle marked "Fatal Plus."

One by one, their tiny bodies went limp and they slumped to the table. By the time she had finished, the director had killed eight animals, five cats and three dogs, on live national television. Dubbed a "public execution," the first-of-its-kind public relations ploy was an instant sensation. To reactionary SPCAs and humane societies across the country, the Peninsula Humane Society and its director had become a hero.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, in Nevada City at the foothills of the Sierras, and elsewhere, normally circumspect people turned to killing perfectly healthy animals on television in the hope that shocking the public would lower shelter intakes. A shelter administrator in Seattle, Washington put it bluntly: "We are killing animals every night

at 6 o'clock behind closed doors and we want very much to change that, to go public with it. We want to do this killing on the steps of city hall and in the parking lots of populated malls and in parks. We want people to see it because there is nothing like that experience."

But no one involved, not the director, not the Seattle administrator, not the reporters, no one rigorously sought to answer a simple question that might have brought these immoral ploys to an end: *Do we have to kill these animals in the first place?*

Had they truly considered the question, they would have found their answer. Instead, content to regurgitate tired clichés and pass the blame to others, these individuals gleefully proclaimed to a national press that the killing would be brought to where people work, live and play. In Seattle, as in San Mateo, New York, Atlanta, St. Louis, Los Angeles, Boston, in cities great and small, directors earning upwards of six-figure salaries running shelters with multi-million dollar budgets and endowments would continue to kill 50%, 60%, 70%, even 80% of animals without ever asking, do we have to kill these animals in the



first place? The answer that conquered San Francisco and then turned east as it began its life-affirming march across the country to Ithaca, New York would, for now, remain unheard.

What went wrong?

In 1872, the Women's Pennsylvania SPCA—shocked at the cruel and public killing of stray dogs favored at the time by Philadelphia dog catchers—accepted the first pound contract in the United States and established a three-pronged approach to stray animals. First, it began a humane education program promoting lifetime commitments and the importance of keeping pets in the home. Second, it offered homeless animals for adoption. Third, the Women's Pennsylvania SPCA introduced the use of a gas chamber to replace old, slow, and more painful practices of killing stray animals. But the effort to save lives was not allowed to play itself out.

Instead, these three approaches—killing, and to a lesser extent, education and adoption—were

endorsed on a national scale, and have remained the mainstays of pet population control ever since.

In 1910, for example, a shelter in Boston adopted the following policy, more or less identical in either policy or practice of most shelters: “We keep all dogs we receive, unless very sick or vicious, five days; then those unclaimed are humanely put to death except a limited number of desirable ones for which we can find good homes. We keep from twenty to thirty of the best of the cats and kittens to place in homes and the rest are put to death... We do not keep a large number of animals alive...”

From animal control in New York City to humane societies throughout California, killing became the centerpiece of shelter strategy.

In the end, if administrators in San Mateo and Seattle are to be blamed, it is primarily for their blind adherence to a now century old tradition of killing; with one notable exception. While the Women's Pennsylvania SPCA took over the contract to reduce the public displays of cruelty, these individuals were trying to take it back into the public squares.

Blaming the Victim

For much of history, animals were considered mere commodities who pulled our wagons, provided the products for our farms, herded our sheep, and kept our barns free of mice. In post-World War II

America, however, social and demographic changes in society at large produced changes in the status of animals as well. Many animals—dogs and cats in particular—were now overwhelmingly viewed as companions instead of servants.

But in addition to the moral change manifested in an increased status for pet dogs and cats, two other key changes were evident. The first was technical—shelters and communities now had the ability to perform widespread and high volume sterilization of animals safely, with relative ease and at relatively low cost. Shelters were now able to reduce unwanted births and thus the number of animals surrendered, and subsequently killed in shelters to a degree never before imagined but now easily attainable.

The second change was economic. America was getting rich, and an unfolding humane ethic meant donations and bequests to animal welfare organizations on a scale unimaginable in the past. The increased wealth made available to animal welfare organizations combined with a prospering economy resulted in millionaire shelters and high salaried shelter directors. By the 1980s, the top organizations each had assets ranging from 40 million and approaching 100 million dollars.

Combined, the moral, technical and economic changes could—and should have—ended the era of

mass killing in American shelters. But it did not. Instead, an institutionalized mentality of killing came to prevail. Adopting the view that the public, not the shelter itself, was responsible for what happened to the animals it took in, the local shelter came to distrust the pet owning public. And the public, in turn, began to see the local shelter more and more as its enemy.

The New Order

In order to force the public to become “responsible pet owners,” national agencies came up with a plan that was aptly nicknamed “LES.” LES was an acronym for Legislation, Education and Sterilization. The first prong promoted legislation requiring people to keep better track of their pets, usually through licensing and confinement laws. The second prong was aimed at educating children about “responsible” pet ownership, in hopes that they would grow up to do the “right” thing. The third involved forcing people to spay and neuter their pets. It was widely popular among local shelters. Indeed, LES was sweeping the nation. And it was doomed to failure from the start.





Prong One: Legislation

A flurry of legislation aimed at making people responsible was promoted and passed in localities nationwide. Among the many laws favored, the most common were those: 1. that required dogs and cats to be confined in homes; 2. that required dogs and to a lesser extent cats to be licensed with local authorities; 3. that limited the number of animals a family could care for; 4. that prohibited the feeding of stray cats; and, 5. that provided authority for animal control officers to seize and destroy pets they deemed a “nuisance.” The theory behind all these laws was to severely curtail not only the public’s “bad” behavior, but also the bad behavior of the animals. Instead, the laws ended up being ignored, or worse—targeting the wrong people.

In towns and communities throughout the United States, well-meaning people, many of them elderly, found themselves threatened by animal control authorities for feeding the stray cats who wandered to their backyards in search of food. As “owners” under these new

ordinances, they were violating the law for “allowing” the cats outside, a curious twist of facts since these people were not allowing anything, other than allowing the animals to have occasional food.

Dogs fared little better under these new laws. Dogs who were picked up by the “dog catcher” were held on threat of execution if their owners did not pay licensing fees, impoundment penalties, and other fines for the return of their pet. Many localities passed laws prohibiting dogs from being on any street or public place unless collared and leashed, thus preventing dog owners from exercising and socializing their dogs in parks and other places.

Since the Legislation prong of LES was premised on the fact that the public was “bad” and had to be “punished” and “coerced” into doing the right thing, it ignored the obvious—even if its proponents were right, the law would nonetheless miss its intended target since responsible people acted responsibly whether there was a law or not, while truly irresponsible people would merely ignore the laws.

The laws also limited the number of animals a family could own to often small numbers—three or four in some cases—merely limited the number of animals a caring family could help and thus prevented adoptions. In the end, however, since failure to comply often resulted in the pet’s impoundment

and killing, the net effect of the legislation was to exacerbate shelter killing.

Prong Two: Education

While HSUS was encouraging localities to pass such laws, it was also encouraging shelters to educate school children in the hope that they would grow up with more humane views than their parents. And so, in communities nationwide, shelter employees, often with dogs and cats in tow, would enter classroom after classroom where overworked teachers needing a break met them with relief, and wide-eyed school children petted animals while grinning from ear to ear. Meanwhile, generations of shelter directors boasted to their constituents about the number of school children they were reaching with their humane message and promising that the light at the end of the tunnel, the mythical place where animals were loved and had lifetime homes, was as close as the emancipation of these kids. It was, and remains, a lovely thought.



But this effort was never challenged to see if it could actually get results. In fact, no shelter director—not a single one—could point to any: Were more animals being sterilized because of these efforts? Were people keeping their pets longer? Was the death rate at the shelter declining because of it? Would these children grow up to be more responsible pet owners? No one had any answers. Despite tight budgets and cuts in the areas of animal care, shelters continued to send legions of staff members into classrooms without any proof that it has was having or ever hoped to have any impact whatsoever on the death rate in shelters. Over twenty years of humane education has yet to produce a single study showing it has made any bit of difference.

Prong Three: Sterilization

It was here that proponents could have hit pay dirt. Had shelters focused on prong three, had in fact, promoted it, pushed it, paid for it with their tens of millions of dollars sitting in bank accounts, the end result would have been a No Kill nation. But most didn't, afraid to alienate private practice veterinarians who were suspicious of shelters.

In order to increase the number of animals sterilized—the one thing that would have had dramatic results—national shelter agencies predictably encouraged the passing of even more laws, this time to force pet owners to spay/neuter at



their own expense. Many localities took up the banner, passing laws that required pet owners to spay or neuter their dogs and cats on threats of fines, increased licensing costs, impoundment and killing of the pet, and in at least one case, the potential for a jail sentence.

Despite studies showing that simply providing a low-cost alternative doubled the number of poor people who spayed or neutered their pets, and that the wealthiest communities voluntarily spayed/neutered their pets at four times the rate of their poor counterparts, localities failed to provide meaningful solutions to obstacles that prevented people from acting the way shelters wanted them to.

While laws were passed to force people to spay or neuter their pets,

little was done about the high cost of the surgeries charged by private veterinarians that kept poor people from complying. Even in the poorest communities where the federal government was subsidizing the cost of home heating oil to prevent families from freezing during the winter, in order to appease veterinarians who continued to oppose perceived threats to their profits, no effort was made to provide an alternative to a costly \$150 dog spay.

Not surprisingly, the effort didn't pay off. In fact, since LES was not reducing the perceived need to kill animals to any significant degree, it merely perpetuated the "catch and kill" mentality among shelter workers, as well as hardened their distrust of people. Sadly, the view was endorsed by virtually every major shelter.

Traditional shelters had a new enemy: the American public. And, in turn, the public had even more reason to avoid their local shelter: they did little more than kill animals.

Never Mind the Laws, Just Fix the Animals

If there was a solution it was not hard to see: make spay/neuter affordable. On February 17, 1971, Mercy Crusade opened the first low-cost spay/neuter clinic in the country for owned pets, with the City of Los Angeles paying for the veterinary staff. By 1973, two more clinics opened, the first was expanded a year later, and a fourth



clinic opened in 1979. The program was so successful that Los Angeles shelters were killing half the number of animals than they were prior to the clinics in just the first decade of the program. Every dollar invested in the program was saving taxpayers ten dollars in animal control costs because of the reduced numbers of animals they were handling. And despite outcry from private veterinarians and their associations, there was no discernible loss of business.

With four clinics operating, private veterinarians were still performing 87% of all neutering within Los Angeles, because the clinics were being used by poor people who would not otherwise have had their pets altered. While national "leaders" were trying to appease private veterinarians, Los Angeles had begun the march to save the animals.

But the effort wasn't allowed to play itself out. After two decades, the clinics were closed, and Los Angeles began following a different path: the thoroughly discredited road to LES. On March 22, 2000,

the city council passed the nation's strongest spay/neuter law. During the legislative process, the shelter director proposed a misdemeanor for violators, with penalties of up to six months a jail, making failure to license a dog on par with weapons possession and domestic violence. But the final ordinance, while less draconian, nonetheless punished the poor with fines of up to \$500 and empowered animal control officers to go door-to-door with the ability to fine, confiscate, and subsequently kill animals. No effort was made to reopen the spay/neuter clinics that had brought Los Angeles to the lowest third of per capita of U.S. killing. Not surprisingly, the law has thus far predictably failed to achieve the desired results.



Historically, “catch and kill” animal sheltering in the U.S. has left a legacy, intended or not, of stifling local innovation, institutionalizing defeatism, and promoting the notion that shelters were required—indeed, were morally obligated—to kill the bulk of their occupants. In a very short period of time, this view hardened to the point that any efforts to break the status quo—to save feral cats, to promote offsite adoptions, or to stop the killing of many of them altogether—was met with virulent opposition and a backlash of national proportions. Until one city asked the question, do we need to kill these animals in the first place?, and found a thoughtful answer.

No Kill Comes of Age

On April 1, 1994, after months of negotiation and the threat of a public initiative, a memorandum of understanding between the San Francisco SPCA and the city’s Animal Control agency was signed guaranteeing a home for every healthy dog and cat in San Francisco. Each and every healthy dog and cat who entered the city’s pound would be saved—no matter how many there were or how long it took.

And what virtually every animal shelter in the country kept saying was an impossibility became a reality for the fourth largest city in the country’s most populous state. After the first year of the pact, the deaths of healthy animals in San Francisco shelters dropped to zero,

and the deaths of sick and injured animals dropped by close to 50%. But the real treasure for San Francisco dogs and cats was the formalization of an adoption agreement that saved the lives of 2,500 additional animals every year that the city shelter could not or would not place—effectively putting them on death row without the SPCA’s intervention. With a huge groundswell of support, the San Francisco SPCA went from the brink of bankruptcy in a city that took in over 20,000 animals per year, most of whom were killed, and became the then- safest urban community for homeless pets in the United States.

The proverbial Rubicon had been crossed. The San Francisco SPCA had fired the first volley, and with it began the No Kill revolution.

