



*Chapter 8*

**MOVING FROM AVOIDING “FATES WORSE THAN DEATH”  
TO FINDING FATES BETTER THAN DEATH**

*“Public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed.”*

Abraham Lincoln (1858). Ottawa, Illinois debate with Stephen Douglas.

In the last half of the nineteenth century, packs of hungry dogs roamed American streets trying to elude dog catchers and a chase that often ended with them being clubbed to death or drowned. Sometimes their deaths were not as violent, but equally tragic. The Animal Rescue League scoured the beaches around Boston each fall after the turn of the century and euthanized the animals found roaming there after discovering that

“(m)any families take dogs and cats with them to their summer homes at the beaches or else adopt strays during their stay there. When the time for departure arrives, no thought is given to these creatures. They are left to struggle to maintain life for a miserable month or two until they perish during the winter months.” Craig Brestrup (1997), *Disposable Animals: Ending the Tragedy of Throwaway Pets*. Camino Bay Books: Kendalia, Texas, p. 24.

Animal shelters began as a refuge from this often cruel and uncaring world. But the world has changed a great deal since then. Cruelty and inhumanity are not nearly as common as they were. By now, most people have brought cats and dogs into their homes and many have begun to treat them as companions and even four-legged members of their family.

Many shelters have not changed as much. Some shelters continue to be protective enclaves, largely separate and apart from their communities. This protectiveness is understandable, given their experience. Although horrific cruelty cases are no longer as frequent, people who work in animal shelters see them regularly, along with hoarding cases and pets that have been abandoned by their caretakers. Against this background, shelter staff have good reason to think they are almost the only people who care about homeless animals.

But that isn't true. Surveys consistently find that large numbers of everyday people care for free-roaming cats. A 2007 Ohio survey found that one person in four had fed a free-roaming cat in the past year. Often people go further and take a homeless animal home. In 1996 alone, people in the United States took more than 2.5 million stray and abandoned cats and dogs off the streets and into their homes, twice as many homeless animals as shelters placed in new homes.

Less than 3% of all caretakers give up their pets to a shelter each year, but shelter workers see all of them and seldom see the other 97%. Until recently, the conventional wisdom was that shelter overpopulation was produced by "the tragedy of throwaway pets" that most people had given up for casual or trivial reasons. But that wasn't true, either.

In early 1999, after learning of a Massachusetts study which found that many people who ultimately brought their pets to a shelter had struggled hard to avoid that, the Monadnock Humane Society in West Swanzey, New Hampshire set up a Rehoming Service for Valued Pets (RSVP).

**CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:** Over the years, programs that provided spaying and neutering at reduced cost have been largely responsible for the great increase in pet sterilization rates in the United States.

**FACT:** Until recently, less than one fifth of all pet sterilizations were provided by animal protection groups or veterinarians at reduced prices. More than four fifths of the sterilizations have been performed in private veterinary clinics at regular prices.

**SOURCE:** Joyce Briggs (2006). *Non-Surgical Sterilizants for Pet Population Control: Are They Worth The Price?* Proceedings of the Third International Symposium, Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs.

**CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:** In the United States, most of the stray, homeless, and abandoned pets that find new homes are placed there by shelters and other animal protection groups.

**FACT:** People take far more stray and homeless cats and dogs from streets and alleys directly into their homes than shelters place in new homes.

**SOURCE:** New Jr., JC, Kelch WJ, Hutchinson JM, Salman MD, King M, Scarlett JM, & Kass PH (2004). Birth and death rate estimates of cats and dogs in U.S. Households and related factors. *J. Appl. Animal Welfare Sci.* 7 (4): 238.

Caretakers who contacted the shelter to surrender a pet were asked what made them decide to give up the animal. Sometimes shelter staff were able to help the caretaker solve the problem and keep the pet. In other cases, they helped the caretaker place the animal with a friend or neighbor or a person on the shelter’s referral list. In urgent cases, the animal was admitted to the shelter right away; if things could wait and the shelter was full, the animal was placed on a waiting list and the caretaker contacted regularly to reassess the situation.

People’s reaction was not what the staff expected. As Rochelle Garfinkel, the shelter’s Director of Education, recalled:

“While we were braced for furious outbursts from people when we explained that we simply didn’t have space available for their pet at the moment, we were pleasantly surprised to find that the vast majority of people partnered with us to develop a plan for their animal. This change in procedure, albeit a significant one, reduced euthanasia for space or treatable illness to zero in 1999. That was our goal for 2000, and we achieved it one full year early.” Rochelle Garfinkel (2000), “Shaping the Behavior of Pet Owners,” Presentation given at the HSUS EXPO 2000.

Through their experience with the RSVP program and other outreach work, shelter staff learned that many of the beliefs they had about people who decided to surrender a pet were wrong. Rochelle listed the myths that were shattered in a presentation she made at the HSUS’s Animal Care Expo 2000:

*“MYTH: People don’t care what happens to their pets.*

When told honestly that we have no space to house their pet, so the only thing we could right now do is euthanize their pet (and we don’t provide that as a service), most people are willing to wait until space is available. We learned what we’d been listening to for years (but not really hearing); that people don’t want their pets euthanized, and that’s why they call us. All we did was leave some responsibility in the

hands of the pet owner, rather than allowing them to dump all their responsibility on us.

*MYTH: People only call at the 11th hour.*

By letting go of the ‘fates worse than death’ trap, we began to have honest dialogues with people even when it sounded as if they were at the end of their rope. What we learned is that although their situation is originally presented as an emergency that we must deal with, it is often the highly charged emotions surrounding their situation that causes this false sense of urgency. If, as before, we allowed or encouraged the owner of an eight-month old husky mix (that just destroyed the new couch) to bring in the dog immediately, chances are they would do so. Since we do not present that as an option, we were able to help the pet owner understand the reason for her pet’s behavior and what she can do to make it better. Emotions subside, she is able to talk to someone who will listen to her problems, and she realizes she really doesn’t want to give up her pet. Often when we contact that pet owner the next week, her outlook has changed, the behavior has improved and she believes she can salvage her relationship with her pet. MHS [Monadnock Humane Society] is now serving as a safety net, and helping pet owners solve problems on their own.

*MYTH: The shelter is the only option.*

Both staff and the public seemed to believe this myth. We were hesitant to trust pet owners, breed rescue groups, breeders, veterinarians, even other shelters. We thought we were the only experts, and bringing an animal to the shelter was the best option. Recognizing that statistics showed many people were already rehoming pets on their own, and that getting a dog, cat, or other pet from a friend, colleague or relative was extremely common, we began to promote that as an option. We help pet owners figure out what is best for their pet, and sometimes that is all they need, even if it is something as difficult as taking a young animal with aggressive tendencies to their vet for euthanasia. Once again, it is their choice and their responsibility to explore the other options we present, but in the past we didn’t believe they would do so.

*MYTH: We can’t trust people who surrender their pets.*

This proved entirely untrue, although it took a lot of convincing for us to see it. As part of the intake process, we discuss each person’s (and animal’s) situation individually. In some cases, we agree to call the pet owner if we determine we are unable to place their pet, and allow the owner to reclaim them (often after some medical care and spay/neuter). Even if the owner will not be able to take the animal back, we

invite them to call and check on the animal while they are in the shelter, and we do sometimes even agree to call them before the animal is (if necessary) euthanized. The whole aspect of involving the original owner increases the workload on shelter staff, is often highly charged emotionally, but it is also a way for people to have both closure and control over a difficult situation.” Rochelle Garfinkel (2000), “Shaping the Behavior of Pet Owners,” Presentation given at the HSUS EXPO 2000.

Roberta Troughton—who developed many of Monadnock Humane Society’s outreach programs and coined the phrase “the best shelter is a humane community”—summed up the reasoning behind their approach:

“At MHS [Monadnock Humane Society] we’ve realized that protecting animals from “fates worse than death” has at least as much (but probably more) to do with our own fears and guilt as with reality. And given the numbers, the best case scenario in our community, putting our energies into controlling adoptions only helps about 2,800 animals and families in a community of 18,000 animal-owning households. Shelters don’t save animals; *people* do. Shelters don’t employ enough people to save all the animals, so we need communities full of people working *with us* to look out for animals. The secret to getting people to work *with us* is to work *with them*.” Roberta Troughton (1999), “The Best Shelter is a Humane Community,” 1999 Leadership Forum Proceedings, American Humane Association: Washington, D.C.

Monadnock’s experience with its counseling and rehoming program is not unique. Humane societies that have established similar programs have found they were able to help many people keep their pet or find another home for the animal. Barbara Carr found that after her shelter in western New York began offering to sterilize pets that people considered relinquishing, many of them were able to keep the pet. After the Jacksonville Humane Society began counseling people about their pet’s behavioral problems and providing other assistance to caretakers who originally sought to surrender their pet, two in five were able to keep their pet or find another home for the animal. As a result, intakes at local shelters dropped significantly. (The statistics are shown in Figure 13 on Page 70 of *Replacing Myth With Math*.) And the Richmond SPCA found that intakes at local shelters dropped by 21% after it established a pet retention and rehoming program in 2002. (See Figure 14 on Page 70 of *Replacing Myth With Math*).

Programs like RSVP and Feral Freedom could be the first steps toward restructuring our animal sheltering system. Traditional animal shelters usually try to do many different things:

- ◆ Place healthy and behaviorally sound pets in new adoptive homes;

- ◆ Rehabilitate cats and dogs who are aggressive or have other significant behavioral problems;
- ◆ Provide veterinary care to pets with significant health problems;
- ◆ Provide shelter to lost pets until they can be reunited with their caretaker;
- ◆ Impound and euthanize unsocialized dogs and cats; and
- ◆ Provide shelter to animals that have been victims of cruelty or neglect.

### **GETTING TO ZERO: THE ROLE OF INFORMATION-BASED SHELTER ADMISSION POLICIES**

Until recently, most traditional shelters followed an “open door” admission policy. They accepted every animal a caretaker wanted to give up, no questions asked, even if the shelter was full and another animal already at the shelter would have to be put down to make room. They believed that if the animal was not admitted, it would likely be doomed to a life of cruelty or deprivation so stark that it would suffer a “fate worse than death.”

Like many other long-held beliefs that have guided shelters, the “fate worse than death” assumption was based more on urban legend and conventional wisdom than any real data about what had happened to animals that had not been admitted to a shelter. When some shelters took a second look, they found that many animals did not need to enter the shelter. In some cases, the problems that had moved a caretaker to surrender the pet could be solved. In others, the animal could be safely placed with a friend or neighbor. And sometimes the need to find another home for the animal was not urgent and could wait until the shelter had room.

Shelters would not think of following a blanket approach when they decide whether to approve an adoption or euthanize an animal. They take into account all the information they can get about the individual animal and its situation before deciding what is best for that animal. Following the same evidence-based approach when they make admission decisions will often help them find a fate better than death for the animal.

Each of these groups has different needs. Those with health problems are best served in a veterinary clinic-type setting. Those with behavioral problems may need a training program. Those

awaiting adoption or return home just need a safe and healthy place. Whatever their particular needs, they all are entitled—at least—to the Five Freedoms that farm animals deserve:

1. **Freedom from Hunger and Thirst** - by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigor.
2. **Freedom from Discomfort** - by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
3. **Freedom from Pain, Injury, or Disease** - by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
4. **Freedom to Express Normal Behavior** - by providing sufficient space, proper facilities, and company of the animal's own kind.
5. **Freedom from Fear and Distress** - by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.<sup>2</sup>

These freedoms can be incompatible with the high-stress, high-density environment of a traditional animal shelter. By trying to serve too many animals, traditional shelters often overburden themselves. In trying to do too many different things in the same place at the same time with the same staff, none are done as well as they could be. And overcrowding inevitably leads to stress and disease, which, in turn, undermine the shelter's ability to provide first-quality veterinary care to animals that need it or to keep animals healthy so they can be placed in new homes or reunited with their caretaker.

One advantage of a program like RSVP is that it replaces a blanket “one-size-fits-all” approach with individualized assessments. The services an animal receives are determined by its situation and its needs. That determines where it receives them, too. Often it is not in a shelter. For the RSVP program, about half of the animals were admitted to the shelter, either immediately or after a waiting period; about a third of the time, the caretaker was able to rehome the pet, either with a friend or neighbor or a person referred by the shelter; in many other cases a caretaker was provided with needed advice or services and kept the pet. (Statistics about RSVP outcomes during the program's first ten months are shown on the next page.)

The same individualized approach should be followed after an animal has been admitted into the sheltering system. The services it receives and the place where it receives them should be determined by its own situation and needs. This will require “unbundling” the services now delivered in a traditional shelter and the development of specialized, small-scale programs like shelter medical clinics, training centers, and adoption sites.

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<sup>2</sup> United Kingdom Farm Animal Welfare Council.

**OUTCOMES OF MONADNOCK HUMANE SOCIETY'S  
REHOMING SERVICE FOR VALUED PETS (RSVP) PROGRAM (3/99-12/99)**

| OUTCOME                  | DOGS | CATS | ALL ANIMALS |
|--------------------------|------|------|-------------|
| Brought to MHS           | 44%  | 45%  | 44%         |
| Placed with Friend       | 26%  | 26%  | 26%         |
| Keeping Pet              | 11%  | 13%  | 10%         |
| Placed with MHS Referral | 8%   | 3%   | 5%          |
| Brought to Other Shelter | 4%   | 1%   | 2%          |
| Owner Put to Sleep       | 3%   | 0%   | 2%          |
| Other/No Information     | 6%   | 12%  | 11%         |

Rochelle Garfinkel (2000). Shaping the Behavior of Pet Owners. The Humane Society of the United States, EXPO 2000, 5.

Traditional shelters have their roots in the same soil as orphanages. The same kind-hearted, protective impulse gave rise to both. Our orphanages were shuttered long ago. Institutional care has been replaced with a system of community-based services overseen by child-protection workers who develop and implement individualized service plans based on the particular needs of each child, champions who challenge any threat to their vulnerable wards. Child-protection workers affiliated with many of the oldest animal protection organizations—like the American Humane Association and the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—guided and oversaw this transition. We would do well to follow their path in our animal protection work.

**GETTING TO ZERO:  
THE ROLE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION AND AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS**

Everyday people have been responsible for most of the progress we've made in reducing the shelter death toll. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, over the years, caretakers have had far more of their own pets sterilized at private veterinary clinics than those that have been sterilized through reduced-cost spay/neuter programs. Public education and awareness programs about pet overpopulation and the benefits of pet sterilization have often been the catalyst that prompted people to have their pets sterilized. Education underlies the Sterilization part of the Legislate-Educate-Sterilize (L-E-S) triad.

It also provides the foundation for legislative campaigns. As Abraham Lincoln pointed out in the quotation at the beginning of the chapter, legislative initiatives usually succeed only if information and awareness campaigns have paved the way for them.

Education not only supports the Legislation and Sterilization parts of the L-E-S Program, it also can have a much wider impact than either of the others. Sterilization programs operate community-by-community. At most, shelter overpopulation laws affect a single state. Educational campaigns, though, can reach the entire country all at once.

We reduced the shelter death rate three times faster in the 1980s and 1990s than in the past decade. Our earlier progress coincided with national public education campaigns like the “Be a P-A-L: Prevent-A-Litter” campaign conducted by the HSUS during those years. Given the great impact educational programs can have, this may not be just a coincidence. We may have made less progress in recent years because we’ve failed to continue developing strong national information and awareness campaigns, a critical oversight but one that can easily be fixed as we go forward.